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Exploring the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness through quantitative and qualitative study

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"When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is us"

- Lewis B. Smedes, The Art of Forgiving (1997)

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ABSTRACT

Forgiveness is considered a positive way to respond to an offense. Recently, researchers have suggested that a number of factors may be related to one's ability and desire to forgive. Specifically, the religious commitment of the offended individual has been proposed as a potentially influential variable in the forgiveness process; however, few studies have examined this connection. In study 1, to understand beliefs and values that may encourage forgiveness in different religious traditions, religious participants who had experienced an offense committed against them were interviewed about factors that motivated them to forgive and strategies they used to reach forgiveness. Results indicated that while many strategies used to forgive were congruent with forgiveness techniques promoted in prior research, participants also reported developing original strategies to achieve forgiveness. In addition, study 2 explored how religious commitment may be associated with forgiveness extended to an offender after participation in an intervention designed explicitly to promote forgiveness. Results suggested that there was no difference in the change in forgiveness-related outcomes for people of high versus moderate to low religious commitment. Trait forgivingness was also examined as a potential mediator of the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness. Results indicated that trait forgivingness fully mediated the relationship between religious commitment and revenge, but not the relationship between religious commitment and empathy or avoidance.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most people will experience a deep hurt, offense, or painful experience at some point in their lives. Once a significant hurt has transpired, people often experience painful emotions that can be difficult to cope with. One way that people can cope with such events is through forgiveness. Within the past 20 years, research describing the process and promotion of forgiveness has emerged. Though this field is relatively new, evidence suggests that forgiveness may be a valuable and effective means through which one can overcome painful experiences, move forward from past hurts, and decrease negative psychological symptoms (for a review, see Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005).

As research on forgiveness has expanded, researchers have begun to question what specific elements can either help or hinder one's ability to extend forgiveness (Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). For example, researchers have proposed that religious commitment might influence one's ability to extend forgiveness following a hurtful experience. Worthington, Sandage, and Berry (2000) proposed that religious commitment, because of the significant emphasis placed on forgiveness in major world religions, may help individuals forgive more readily; those who are more committed to religion are more likely to follow the tenets of their faith and might be more likely to forgive others. Though researchers have proposed that religious commitment may be crucial in the forgiveness process, there is a significant lack of research examining the extent to which this is truly influential.

Definitions of Unforgiveness and Forgiveness

As the forgiveness literature has evolved, different understandings of unforgiveness and forgiveness have emerged. However, most researchers agree on certain core concepts that unforgiveness and forgiveness include (Wade & Worthington, 2005). Unforgiveness is comprised of a variety of negative and often quite painful emotions including a desire to seek revenge for a hurt, feelings of strong dislike, hostility, anger, or even hatred towards an offender, and the desire to avoid contact with the offender (McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington & Wade, 1999; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). However, unforgiveness is not synonymous with anger or other emotional reactions that occur immediately after an offense, but develops after a period of rumination about an offense (Worthington & Wade, 1999; Worthington, Berry, & Parrott III, 2001; Wade, Worthington & Meyer, 2005). If an individual cannot effectively cope with the initial emotional reactions of an offense, then the possibility of unforgiveness arises.

Forgiveness is considered to be a two-fold process that includes reducing negative emotions associated with unforgiveness (such as anger or fear) and promoting positive feelings (such as compassion) towards an offender (Enright & North, 1998; Worthington & Wade, 1999; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). Thus, forgiveness is not just the reduction or absence of unforgiveness. When individuals truly forgive, they release feelings of revenge, bitterness, and resentment and embrace positive feelings of generosity and well-being for their offender (Enright & North, 1998; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000).

Misunderstandings of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is commonly confused and often misunderstood, which in many situations can lead to considerable reluctance to extend forgiveness (Macaskill, 2005; Kearns

& Fincham, 2004). Research exploring common understandings of forgiveness indicates that the general public may believe that forgiveness is synonymous with forgetting (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). This is understandable, given the common admonition to "forgive and forget". Many individuals are hesitant to entertain the idea of forgiving an offense because they fear that forgiveness will require them to forget the hurt they endured or excuse the offense committed against them (Luskin, 2002). In our understanding of forgiveness, forgetting is not included because interpersonal hurts (particularly the kinds that bring clients to therapy) are often life altering. To expect that forgiveness includes forgetting would potentially dishonor the experiences of those who have endured considerable offenses. Instead, in such cases forgiveness is integrated into the experience that may be remembered for a lifetime.

Furthermore, some may believe that forgiveness must include the continuation of a relationship with the person who offended them (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). However, as researchers and clinicians in this area have defined it, forgiveness is a distinct concept from reconciliation and does not require an individual to mend, repair, or maintain a relationship with their offender. It is possible for an individual to forgive their offender and still choose not to reconcile with them. For example, an individual who ends an abusive relationship may choose to forgive the abuser, while not returning to the relationship. Lastly, forgiveness is not condoning, pardoning, or overlooking an offense. Forgiving an offender does not indicate that his or her actions were in any way acceptable or excusable. Instead, true forgiveness occurs only after an acknowledgement that the offender committed an unacceptable and hurtful act without which there would be nothing to forgive (Enright and North, 1998).

Forgiveness in Psychotherapy

In the past two decades, a variety of studies have emerged which examine the effectiveness of interventions designed specifically to promote forgiveness (for a review see Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). Most of the interventions that have been examined empirically are provided to participants through a variety of distinct steps which are designed explicitly to educate participants about forgiveness and provide opportunities for resolving specific past hurts. Two primary intervention models, Worthington's Model to REACH Forgiveness (1998), and Enright's Forgiveness Model (Enright & the Human Development Group, 1991; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), have emerged as the most dominant forgiveness intervention methods.

Both of these models have been widely used in forgiveness research and are considered effective for promoting forgiveness, as well as reducing negative psychological symptoms (Baskin & Enright, 2004). For example, in their research with men whose partners had undergone an abortion without their consent, Coyle and Enright (1997) found that participants not only reported increased forgiveness, but decreased anxiety as well. Likewise, Luskin, Ginzburg and Thorensen (2005) found that after completing a forgiveness intervention, 55 college students with interpersonal hurts reported significant increases in forgiveness and also exhibited significant reductions in depressive symptoms.

Worthington's model. Worthington's forgiveness intervention model includes five steps, with each of the main components of the model represented in the acronym REACH (Worthington, 1998). The first step provides individuals with an opportunity to (R) recall and remember painful emotions associated with the offense endured. Second, clients are given techniques to help them (E) empathize with their offender. For example, clients are asked to

consider possible situational factors that may have caused their offenders' actions. During the third step, clients are asked to consider forgiveness as an (A) altruistic gift. During this step individuals are encouraged to recall when they have received forgiveness from others and the gratitude they may have felt for receiving forgiveness (Worthington, 1998). Next, clients are encouraged to (C) commit to forgiving their offender when they are ready to extend forgiveness. Committing to forgiveness may involve stating aloud (most commonly to the counselor or other group participants) that one has chosen to forgive or writing a letter of forgiveness, which is normally not given to the offender. Finally, clients (H) hold onto forgiveness through specific "relapse prevention" strategies, such as telling others about their decision to forgive and reminding themselves that they have chosen to forgive their offender and move forward with their life.

Enright's model. The Enright model includes 20 steps also aimed at promoting forgiveness (Enright and the Human Development Group, 1991; Enright and Fitzgibbons, 2000; Baskin and Enright, 2004). Whereas Worthington's REACH model includes 5 distinct steps, Enright's model organizes the 20 steps into four broad phases. The first phase, which consists of seven steps, is called the Uncovering phase. The Uncovering phase is aimed at examining psychological defenses that may prevent an individual from recalling a hurt, coping with anger towards an offender, developing an awareness of shame due to an offense, and gaining insight about the role of the hurt in one's life. Also in this beginning phase, clients are given an opportunity to remember and release emotions associated with the offense they experienced and are encouraged to examine the role of rumination, or excessive cognitive rehearsal of their offense, in preventing forgiveness. Lastly, during the first phase of the intervention, individuals also explore how the offense has altered their worldview. For

example, after an especially hurtful offense, some people may see the world as unjust and unfair. Examining this change in worldview and learning to cope with it are important elements of this initial phase.

Next, the Decision phase, which includes steps 9-11, focuses on committing to forgiveness and encouraging clients to embrace the possibility of forgiving their offender. Clients begin to examine the option of forgiveness and, if they choose to forgive, begin to commit to the idea of forgiveness. Furthermore, clients might begin to have a "change of heart" toward the offender and start to think about the possibility of forgiveness in their own life (Freedman & Enright, 1996, pg. 986). In the Work phase, which includes steps 12-15, clients are asked to consider the offense from the offender's viewpoint and discuss the importance of empathizing with their offender. In addition, individuals are encouraged to develop a sense of compassion, if possible, for their offender and are asked to see the flaws inherent in all persons. Lastly, in steps 16-20, the Outcome phase, the meaning of forgiveness is reviewed and the personal nature of forgiveness is emphasized. At this stage, clients begin to experience true forgiveness wherein their behaviors, thoughts, and feelings towards the offender shift to become more positive and pro-social in nature (including, for example, compassion, understanding, empathy, and wishes for the offender's well-being).

Though Enright and Worthington's models both have similar goals (primarily the promotion of forgiveness) the precise components used to achieve these goals are different. First, Enright's Forgiveness model (Enright & the Human Development Group, 1991; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) contains of 20 steps, as opposed to Worthington's five step model (Worthington, 1998), which tends to result in a difference in treatment duration. Because of this difference in duration, there are a few elements included in Enright's model

that are not necessarily discussed in Worthington's model. Second, each model has a unique approach to the importance of cognitions in the forgiveness process. While Worthington's model does not place a great deal of emphasis on cognitive processes, Enright's model includes a chance for clients to examine the role of cognitions in preventing forgiveness. Specifically, Enright encourages clients to see how excessive cognitive rehearsal of the offense can actually inhibit the forgiveness process.

Despite the differences in these intervention models, there are many similarities (Wade & Worthington, 2005). Both models provide a clear and concise definition of what forgiveness entails, as well as what forgiveness is not. In addition, both models include an opportunity for clients to recall the offense they endured and the painful emotions associated with it. Furthermore, both models state that forgiveness involves a shift in emotions, thoughts, and behaviors towards the offender and believe that true forgiveness encompasses a change in all three domains. Lastly, both models incorporate the use of empathy and encourage clients to find ways to empathize with their offender and think of possible reasons behind their offenders' actions.

Other intervention models. In addition to the models detailed above, a few important studies have been conducted that utilize forgiveness interventions tailored to specific populations (Rye & Pargament, 2002; Rye et al., 2005). For example, Rye and colleagues developed group forgiveness interventions aimed at promoting forgiveness through the use of explicitly religious techniques. Although Rye's work is based on Worthington's model (Worthington, 1998) and uses some of Enright's techniques, this intervention model also includes religiously tailored components (such as discussion of scripture passages and encouraging individuals to engage in silent prayer and reflection).

Furthermore, forgiveness interventions have been designed specifically for use with couples experiencing infidelity or betrayal. Gordon and Baucom (1998) have proposed a forgiveness model consisting of three distinct stages: impact, search for meaning, and recovery. Gordon and Baucom suggest that these three stages "parallel a person's natural response to traumatic stress" and describe in detail how the process of forgiveness unfolds (pg. 425). During the impact stage, which occurs naturally after an offense, each partner experiences the shock, victimization, and difficult emotions associated with the realization that an offense has occurred. In addition, they may feel intense anger at the way in which they were treated unfairly or unjustly by their spouse. In the second stage, partners search for an understanding of why the offense has transpired. Gordon and Baucom propose that finding meaning behind an offense or trauma can significantly facilitate healing. Furthermore, the second stage of forgiveness may include developing a sense of empathy for one's partner, including the acknowledgement of factors that may have contributed to their betrayal. Finally, in the recovery stage, partners work together to commit to forgiveness. This stage may be characterized by anger over the offense; however, unlike the first stage of significant anger and negative emotions, anger in the recovery stage is often fleeting and less intense. Lastly, partners in this stage may develop a sense of compassion and understanding for one another. In essence, the negative emotions they felt towards their partner begin to subside and are replaced with positive emotions such as understanding, acceptance, and empathy.

Lastly, other researchers have also developed slight variations on forgiveness intervention models. For example, Luskin, Ginzburg, and Thorensen (2005) utilized some of the cognitive behavioral elements (such as disputing irrational beliefs) often found in other

forgiveness models, but coupled these methods with relaxation strategies. Luskin, Ginzburg, and Thorensen trained participants in stress reduction and guided imagery techniques in an effort to promote forgiveness.

Synthesis of forgiveness intervention literature. Each of the above forgiveness intervention models have been tested empirically. These studies have been organized into several meta-analyses examining the overall efficacy of forgiveness interventions (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000; Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). The first meta-analysis, conducted by Worthington, Sandage and Berry, examined 13 studies exploring interventions aimed at promoting forgiveness. They reported finding a "marked dose-effect curve" indicating that the amount of time spent with participants in forgiveness interventions was directly related to an intervention's effect size (pg. 7). As time spent intervening increased, so did the degree of forgiveness participants experienced. Furthermore, they report that the content of the interventions themselves (i.e. specific type of forgiveness model utilized, which components were used with participants) appeared to matter less than the duration of the intervention. Worthington et al. also proposed additional variables that appeared to influence the forgiveness process. One such variable they suggested may have an important effect on forgiveness, but has not yet been adequately researched, is the role of participants' religious beliefs. In addition, further research by Worthington et al. (1996) proposed that persons with strong religiosity (specifically those who fall at or above one standard deviation above the mean) may forgive more readily. Religion, they suggest, may play a key role in promoting forgiveness and should be explored in greater detail in the future.

In the most recent meta-analysis, Wade, Worthington, and Meyer (2005) examined the efficacy of twenty-seven group forgiveness intervention studies. Wade et al. categorized each intervention study into one of three groups: full forgiveness interventions (in which each step of a forgiveness model was utilized), partial forgiveness interventions (which did not utilize a complete model, but instead used only select components) and lastly, no treatment interventions. They reported that, after controlling for time spent on each intervention, full interventions were shown to be more effective at promoting forgiveness than partial interventions. In addition, partial interventions were found to be more effective than no treatment conditions. These findings suggest that certain components of full interventions may be necessary elements in the promotion of forgiveness. Based on these findings, Wade et al. examined each intervention in an effort to determine if specific components are more effective for encouraging forgiveness. They reported that time spent on three specific components were related to intervention effect sizes: encouraging empathy for an offender, helping participants commit to forgiveness, and overcoming unforgiveness (interventions intended to help participants with anger, revenge, and bitterness without specifically promoting forgiveness). These components appeared to be especially central to the promotion of forgiveness and should be seriously considered in future work on forgiveness interventions.

Religion and Forgiveness

In the study of forgiveness, numerous questions have emerged regarding what factors might promote or hinder the forgiveness process. Research has shown, for example, that empathy is a key component to forgiving an offender; those who can develop empathy for their offender are more likely to extend forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal,

1997). Likewise, variables such as the victim's gender, relationship closeness between the victim and offender (ongoing versus temporary relationship), the severity of the offense, and the presence or absence of an apology have also been suggested as vital parts of forgiveness (Kilpatrick, Bissonnette, & Rusbult, 2002; Finkell, Rusbult, Kumashior, & Hannon, 2001; Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000; Ohbuchi, Kameda & Agarie, 1989). In addition, researchers have proposed that religious commitment may significantly influence the forgiveness process (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000; McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Furthermore, the specific religion a person affiliates with does not seem to be nearly as important as the extent to which they are committed to their beliefs. If persons have strong religious beliefs of nearly any kind, Worthington et al. (1996) predict, this may enable them to be more forgiving. Therefore, religious commitment may serve as a potential predictor of forgiveness.

Conceptualizing and operationalizing religious commitment. Religious commitment is a complex variable to conceptualize and measure, and has therefore been defined in a number of ways. Glock (1962) defined religious commitment as consisting of 5 dimensions. Dimension one, Experiential commitment, is the emotional reaction individuals experience when they are communicating with God, or the transcendent force of their particular religion. Dimension two, Ideological commitment, occurs when individuals subscribe to and endorse the belief system outlined by their religious faith. In Dimension three, Ritualistic commitment, individuals follow the practices of their religious tradition. In essence, their behaviors, such as attendance at religious services and participation in religious sacraments, are the sign of their commitment. In Dimension four, Intellectual commitment, individuals obtain detailed knowledge of their faith tradition, for example, knowledge of sacred texts and

religious founders/leaders. Lastly, Dimension five, Consequential commitment, "encompasses the secular effects of religious belief, practice, experience, and knowledge on the individual" (Glock & Stark, 1965, pg. 21). Specifically, Consequential commitment refers to the attitudes, behaviors, and values an individual demonstrates towards his or her fellow man as a result of their religious beliefs.

Other researchers have elaborated on the definition of religious commitment. Worthington (1988) has defined religious commitment as encompassing the following variables: frequency of church attendance, participation in church activities, agreement and support for theological components of faith, and frequency of reference to the Bible, Torah, or other sacred texts (Worthington, 1988). In addition, Worthington proposes that religious commitment includes prayer, bible study, or devotional behaviors, the extent to which religious faith is incorporated into daily life, and one's status of membership in a religious institution.

As definitions of religious commitment have developed, various methods for measuring and gauging an individual's religious commitment have been proposed. Some researchers, for example, have measured religious commitment with single-item questions meant to objectively gauge participants religiosity (for example, how committed to your religious beliefs are you? How often do you attend religious services? How frequently do you pray?). While these questions are sometimes effective, single item measures of religious commitment are not as reliable and valid as established multi-item measures (such as the Religious Commitment Inventory-10; Worthington et al., 2003). In addition, single item questions may also lead to problems of social desirability, as participants may be tempted to portray themselves in an overly positive light.

Forgiveness and reconciliation across religious traditions. Forgiveness is of paramount importance to a variety of religious traditions (Rye et al., 2000). The vast majority of world religions emphasize the importance of forgiveness, in some fashion or another, in their belief systems. Although the rationale behind extending forgiveness often differs, as does the degree of emphasis on forgiveness, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism all include forgiveness as an element of their faith. To better understand the role of forgiveness in religious traditions, a sampling of major world religions from both the East (e.g., Buddhism and Hinduism) and West (e.g., Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) will be examined. Although no religious tradition is monolithic and statements about an agreed-upon belief or teaching of a particular religion is often difficult, generalizations can be helpful as an overview and as a point of comparison with other religions. Therefore, the following section includes many generalizations that are intended to summarize the main teachings about forgiveness by a particular religious tradition with the caveat that not all adherents to that particular faith would necessarily endorse that belief.

Buddhists believe that the world is "fundamentally unjust"; but that through karma the balance of justice in the world is maintained (Rye et al., 2000, pg. 27). Karma, the belief that everything we do has a direct influence on our future, either in this life or upon reincarnation, is an essential part of the Buddhist tradition (Farrer- Halls, 2000). Positive actions can enable one to reap future rewards, whereas negative actions can result in future punishment. It is in light of this worldview that Buddhists approach forgiveness and its purpose. Essentially, forgiveness is considered a moral quality that promotes balance, relationship harmony, and positive karma. Therefore, if a Buddhist chooses not to forgive,

they will likely reap negative repercussions later in life, or in a future life, for this lack of forgiveness (Farrer-Halls, 2000).

In the Buddhist faith, forgiveness is thought to be the opposite of resentment and represents the absence of anger towards an offender (Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, 2005). When one is resentful, they may act unjustly towards others. To prevent this, Buddhists encourage a two-part forgiveness process. First, to truly embrace forgiveness, the victim must reduce and eventually release desires for retribution or revenge against their offender. Any plans for retaliation or aggressive behaviors towards their offender must be abandoned. Second, the victim must alter their feelings and emotions towards their offender. Specifically, they must strive to release anger and resentment they feel towards the offender. According to Buddhist beliefs, forgiveness does not encompass only one of these elements (for example, not avenging an offense but continuing to experience intense anger); instead, forgiveness occurs only when both elements are present (no retaliatory behavior and a reduction of anger). In addition, Buddhist faith emphasizes that by embracing compassion and pity for the offender, victims can genuinely empathize with their offender, which in turn will lead to forgiveness (Rye et al., 2000).

The Hindu tradition has an especially unique understanding of forgiveness which is both distinct from and similar to the Buddhist, Christian, Islam, and Jewish faiths. Similar to Buddhist faith, Hindus believe that the order of the world is dominated by karma, meaning that “man himself is the architect of his life…what he did in the past life is entirely responsible for what he is in the present life” (Sharma, 2005; pg. 78). The concept of karma is highly applicable to forgiveness; as Rye et al. (2000) explain, “one can presume that lack of forgiveness, negative feelings, and unresolved, seething anger can only spill over into

future births" (pg. 29). Furthermore, Hindus do not see sin as punishable by a higher being as the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions do. Instead, they believe that sinful actions of each individual will eventually (perhaps in their next life) have consequences (Shriver, 1998). Finally, Hindu traditions emphasize that to truly follow the path of righteousness one must extend forgiveness to offenders.

Jewish traditions also place great importance on forgiveness as a vital element of faith (Dorff, 1998; Rye et al., 2000). According to Judaism, the extension of forgiveness to another person is, in essence, removing a debt and wiping clear the offender's record of wrongdoings. Like Christians and Muslims, Jews believe that because God is forgiving towards humans, as demonstrated in the Torah (for example Exodus 34:6, Psalms 145:17, and Deuteronomy 11:22), humans must also forgive each other. Rye et al. explain the importance of forgiveness in the Jewish tradition by stating, "…it is not only God's forgiveness that occupies this central place in Judaism, but also human forgiveness" (pg. 30). Furthermore, the Jewish faith proposes that after genuine contrition is offered and the offender has made amends for their actions, it is the victim's duty to extend forgiveness (Dorff, 2003).

Christian traditions also express a strong belief in the value of forgiving others for their transgressions (Rye et al., 2000, pg. 30; Marty, 1998; Worthington, Berry, and Parrott, 2001). According to Christian beliefs, the importance of forgiveness originated with Christ's death on the cross for the salvation of the world. In his death, Christ forgave all persons of their transgressions and provided them with salvation despite any previous offenses they had committed. Therefore, Christians believe that because persons are forgiven by God, they are mandated to forgive others (as demonstrated in the Christian New Testament: for example

Luke 23:34, Matthew 6:12, and Mark 11:25; Beals, 1998; Rye et al. 2000). Beals explains the Christian justification for forgiveness by stating, "God's forgiving love in Christ remains freely offered to sinners and it seasons and sustains the lives of Christians…we become forgiven to be forgiving" (pg. 123) and furthermore, "…when we know we are forgiven by God for Christ's sake, we become moved to forgive others" (pg. 125). Christianity, therefore, proposes that to mimic Christ's forgiveness of people, humans must also attempt to extend forgiveness to their offenders (Rye et al. 2000).

Similarly, the Islamic faith greatly emphasizes the importance of forgiveness. Islamic traditions believe that for true forgiveness to occur, an individual must be forgiven not only by others (interpersonal forgiveness) but by Allah as well. According to Islamic beliefs, Allah is a forgiving, compassionate, and merciful God and forgives all who honestly repent of their sins (Siddiqi, 2004). Because Allah extends grace, mercy, and ultimately, forgiveness to humans, it is vital that persons also extend this forgiveness to others. Furthermore, forgiveness between persons is the basis for many Islamic beliefs. Numerous verses in the Qur'an mention the importance of forgiveness (Qur'an 24:22; 39:53; 42: 25) and emphasize offering forgiveness to others as Allah has first modeled forgiveness towards humans. Lastly, the Qur'an states that persons who forgive others will in turn receive rewards from Allah (Qur'an 42:40).

Despite a similar emphasis on the importance of forgiveness, a few important differences in the understanding of forgiveness among religious traditions are evident (see Table 1). Specifically, the role of reconciliation (defined as the victim and offender continuing or re-establishing a relationship after the offense has transpired) and repentance

Table 1

Beliefs about Repentance and Reconciliation Across Major World Religions.

Tradition:	**Repentance:**	**Reconciliation:**
Buddhism	Not necessary for forgiveness to occur. Forgiveness may be granted with or without apology and contrition.	Not a necessary element of forgiveness. However, reconciliation is often an outgrowth of compassion and pity felt for offender during the forgiveness process.
Christianity	Not necessary for forgiveness to occur. Forgiveness may be granted with or without apology and contrition.	Not a necessary element of forgiveness. Forgiveness may be granted with or without reconciliation with the offender.
Hinduism	Depends on each specific Hindu tradition. Forgiveness without repentance is found in the Hindu tradition (in the Goddess Sri, for example); however, these cases are used to demonstrate theological points and the great ability of Gods, not necessarily as a guideline for human behavior.	Depends on the specific Hindu tradition referenced. Many stories in the Hindu tradition emphasize reconciliation; however, each tradition has a unique understanding of reconciliation requirements.
Islam	Not necessary for forgiveness between humans. Yet, repentance is necessary for Allah to grant forgiveness to us. In this case, we must repent to be forgiven.	Not a necessary element of forgiveness. Reconciliation can be an important part of forgiveness, but is not required.
Judaism	Necessary for forgiveness to occur. Offender must repent to victim and commit to abstaining from the offense in the future. If offender expresses contrition, victim is obliged to forgive.	An important, but not required, element of forgiveness if genuine repentance is offered. An offender is encouraged to be reconciled to the victim and the community as a whole.

(apology and/or contrition after wrongdoing) differ among Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islam, and Jewish faiths (Macaskill, 2005).

In the Buddhist tradition, the extension of forgiveness is seen as not contingent upon repentance. Instead, an offender can be forgiven without extending an apology or expressing remorse. Reconciliation in the Buddhist faith, however, is slightly more complex. Buddhists believe that reconciliation between the victim and offender is not always necessary. It is possible for the victim to feel compassion (and therefore extend forgiveness) towards the offender without reconciliation. However, Buddhists believe that once compassion is extended to the offender, it will often result in reconciliation (Rye et al., 2000).

The Hindu tradition has a somewhat similar perspective on forgiveness, also emphasizing karma and proposing that instead of sins being punishable by a higher power, each person will eventually be punished or rewarded (again, perhaps in another life) for their actions. Because of this view, reconciliation and repentance are not considered to be a necessary antecedent or consequence of forgiveness. If a person chooses to forgive an offense, they will receive rewards for their forgiveness and likewise, their offender will be given eventual punishment. In addition, one is not obliged to repent to be extended forgiveness and furthermore, reconciliation is not a necessary element of forgiveness (Rye et al. 2000).

In Jewish traditions, reconciliation is seen as a necessary element of forgiveness (Dorff, 2003). It is believed that after forgiveness has occurred, individuals should choose to reconcile with the persons they offended, as well as with their family and community. It is important to emphasize, however, that although Judaism does place importance on the role of

reconciliation, Jews do not believe that forgiveness means one should forget or overlook an offense or wrongdoing. Instead the Jewish faith allows for a debt to be forgiven, yet remembered (Rye et al., 2000). In addition, the Jewish faith proposes a unique view of repentance and forgiveness. According to this tradition, if offenders complete the return process, called "teshuvah" (whereby they express contrition and genuine repentance though a variety of steps), the victims not only should forgive, but are obliged to do so (Dorff, 2003; Auerbach, 2005). Furthermore, if victims do not offer forgiveness to offenders who have demonstrated genuine contrition, the victims themselves have sinned (Rye et al., 2000). Rye et al. explain this viewpoint by stating, "Indeed, injured parties who refuse to forgive those who wronged them despite being asked for forgiveness three times in the presence of others are themselves deemed sinners" (pg. 23). It is believed that through the offender's expression of repentance the victim will be able to extend forgiveness (Dorff, 2003). When an offender chooses not to repent, the victim is not obliged to forgive (Auerbach, 2005).

In Christian traditions, reconciliation is not seen as a necessary part of forgiveness, but instead Christians believe forgiveness can be extended at any time and is not contingent upon later reconciliation (Marty, 1998). Christianity also proposes that for forgiveness to occur, an offender does not need to demonstrate repentance for their actions (Marty, 1998). In the Christian faith, forgiveness can be extended to anyone at anytime with or without their knowledge, repentance, or intent to reconcile (Rye et al., 2000).

Islamic tradition believes that a number of antecedents are necessary for one to receive forgiveness. First, a serious offense must be committed in ignorance to merit forgiveness. Those who commit a grave offense with the knowledge that they are deliberately doing wrong and are expecting Allah's forgiveness regardless of this knowledge are not

worthy of forgiveness (Athar, 2006). Second, an offender must express genuine contrition and repentance to have Allah's forgiveness bestowed upon them (Auerbach, 2005). Lastly, as outlined in the Qur'an, to be forgiven an offender must commit to not repeat the same offense in the future (Athar, 2006). Once the above conditions have been met, Muslims believe that Allah's forgiveness erases all record of wrongdoing.

Each of the major world religions examined propose distinct beliefs of reconciliation and repentance in the forgiveness process and all value forgiveness in their own unique way. Due to the strong emphasis religious traditions tend to place on forgiveness, researchers have theorized a possible connection between religious commitment and desire and willingness to forgive.

Psychological research on the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness. In a ground-breaking article on religious commitment within counseling settings, Worthington (1988) proposed a number of hypotheses regarding the experiences and behaviors of religiously-committed individuals in counseling settings, focusing on how religious beliefs influence their actions. Worthington stated that highly religious persons evaluate and approach the world (including their experiences in counseling settings) according to their worldviews, which are dictated by their religious beliefs. Values of highly religious individuals, therefore, are proposed to clearly determine their behaviors and responses to others. Worthington later elaborated on this model, in conjunction with colleagues Kurusu, McCullough, and Sandage (1996), by suggesting that only under specific circumstances do an individual's religious beliefs influence their forgiveness of others. Worthington et al. proposed a standardization for religious commitment, suggesting that individuals who are considered highly religious (defined as those who score at or above 1

standard deviation above the mean on religious commitment inventories) are committed to their faith to such a degree that they may forgive offenses more readily. Worthington et al. stated that for the average person, religion is not a part of their lives to the extent that it will influence their desire to forgive. However, for those who are deeply religious, their desire to forgive according to their religious beliefs may be intensified (Worthington et al. 1996).

Despite the logic of these hypotheses, research thus far has not unequivocally supported them. In contrast, some research has indicated that there is not a relationship between religiosity and forgiveness, leading researchers to describe a Religion-Forgiveness Discrepancy (Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, 2005). Tsang et al. have proposed several possible explanations for the Religion-Forgiveness Discrepancy, the first focusing on measurement and methodological problems in previous research. It is possible, Tsang et al. stated, that a variety of research and methodological flaws have caused some research to cloud the religion-forgiveness connection, if it truly exists. Specifically, Tsang et al (2005) suggested that some current religiosity measures (such as brief self-report instruments) may not adequately measure the complexity of religious behaviors and thoughts. Furthermore, Tsang et al. stated that self-report instruments may lead to recall or encoding biases by participants. For example, participants may easily recall the few times that they were highly forgiving, but may forget and therefore not disclose various other situations in which they were not forgiving. By not adequately measuring forgiveness, researchers may not be able to accurately determine a relationship between forgiveness and religiosity.

A second possible explanation for the Religion-Forgiveness Discrepancy is the rationalization explanation, in which certain religious individuals may actually use their religious beliefs to provide justification for unforgiveness. Some highly religious individuals

may feel that according to their religious values and beliefs, each person should be expected to uphold and maintain a high standard of behavior. When this standard is not met and they are offended by others, they may believe that because of their religious values, it is acceptable to hold grudges, seek revenge, and/or not forgive someone who failed to meet their precise standards of behavior. In essence, their religious faith may provide a justification for revenge and avoidance against an offender and they may believe that by not forgiving, they are upholding their religious and moral values.

Furthermore, some individuals may tell themselves that not forgiving is actually the appropriate moral decision. Tsang et al. (2005) conducted a pilot study as a part of their research to test their moral rationalization theories and concluded that certain individuals do seem prone to the use of their religious beliefs as justification and rationalization for not forgiving an offense. From their research on 38 Christian college students, Tsang et al. found that persons who heavily endorsed scripture passages related to revenge and retribution reported being less forgiving of others. In addition, those reporting belief in forgiving views of God were more likely to exhibit benevolence towards others.

Therefore, as postulated above by Tsang et al. (2005), there is reason to believe that connections between forgiveness and religious commitment may exist such that persons who are highly religious are more likely to forgive. Edwards et al. (2002) examined the relationship between religious faith and the extent to which individuals value forgiveness. In this study of 196 college students, religious faith and forgiveness were significantly related, indicating that those who reported being highly religious were also likely to see themselves as highly forgiving. Although this research indicates a correlation likely exists between religious commitment and the value students place on forgiveness, there are significant

drawbacks to this research. First, this research was cross-sectional, correlational and based on self report. Thus, it cannot address the question of the effect of religious commitment on forgiveness over time, cannot suggest a causal direction, and is susceptible to social desirability bias, which may be particularly activated when religious individuals are presented with questions about forgiveness. Second, Edwards et al. provide information about the connection that exists between religious commitment and to what extent individuals value forgiveness. They do not, however, address the question of whether highly religious individuals are actually more likely to extend forgiveness in real situations.

In addition, Exline et al. (2004) conducted six studies examining the relationship between narcissistic entitlement (defined as having expectations of special treatment from others) and forgiveness. As part of this research, studies one, two, and three included an examination of the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness. In the first study, Exline et al. reported that forgiveness of a specific offender was positively associated with religiosity (defined as religious participation and religious belief salience, that is, the extent to which religious beliefs influence one's everyday life). In study 2, after reading standardized transgression descriptions, those with higher religious commitment exhibited significantly greater motivations to forgive. Lastly, study three indicated that religious commitment was highly associated with trait forgivingness and the value one places on unconditional forgiveness. The above findings indicate that there are likely connections between religious commitment and forgiveness, and also that strong associations appear to exist between one's religiosity, trait forgivingness, and motivations to forgive a specific offense.

Still, additional research has found conflicting results when examining the influence of religious commitment on forgiveness (Greer et al., 2005). In an examination of the relationship between religiosity and vengefulness, 134 college students completed a battery of self-report measures of religiousness, including measures of church attendance behaviors and religious orientation scales, as well as measures of vengefulness. Although this study did not directly address forgiveness per se, vengefulness is a close proxy. Certainly, to the degree that people are feeling vengeful they are not in a state of forgiveness. Greer et al. reported that depending on how one measures religious commitment, the relationship with vengefulness was either positive or negative. For example, when religious commitment was measured by the amount of money that one donated to religious organizations, religiousness was positively related to vengefulness. However, when measured as frequency of attendance at church activities, religious commitment was negatively related to vengefulness. These results are contradictory and indicate that despite outward religiosity, not all religious individuals appear to value non-retaliation. Greer et al. describe the above findings as "oppositional forces" in which individuals may profess outward religious faith (through actions such as donating money to the church), but still maintain vengeful behaviors towards their offenders (p. 56).

Although there are contradictory findings in this area, some researchers have proposed that clear connections between religious commitment and forgiveness do exist in real life situations. Research of this nature provides information about how an individual's religious commitment can either help or hinder something as broad as their experience in psychotherapy or something as specific as their ability to forgive. For example, current research has begun exploring the influence of religious commitment and forgiveness in

applied counseling and psychotherapy settings. In a recent study, Wade, Worthington, and Vogel (2007) examined the impact of religiously tailored interventions on 220 individuals currently receiving either Christian or secular counseling and their 51 therapists. Wade et al. found that religious and non-religious participants responded to therapeutic interventions differently. Specifically, religiously committed clients improved more when they received religiously tailored interventions during their therapy. It may be, as Worthington (1988) originally proposed, that highly religious individuals interact with the world in light of their religious views and therefore, will benefit from interventions that correspond most closely with these beliefs.

Research has also been conducted to explore the influence of religiosity on the effectiveness of group forgiveness interventions (Rye and Pargament, 2002; Rye et al., 2005). Rye and Pargament examined the effects of two forgiveness interventions, a secular intervention condition (which did not incorporate religion) and a religiously tailored intervention (which included explicit religious components) aimed at promoting forgiveness in 58 Christian college women who had experienced a romantic hurt or betrayal. They found that both interventions were equally effective regardless of the secular or religiously-based content. In essence, participants were able to forgive their offender in either intervention condition. However, although there were no differences based on the type of intervention used, Rye and Pargament did not assess for the potential interaction between intervention content and client religious commitment. As suggested in research conducted by Wade et al. (2007), highly religious clients are likely to benefit from religiously tailored interventions. Had Rye and Pargament measured religious commitment they may have found this to be a significant moderator of the effect of the different treatments over time. Perhaps those

participants who were most religiously committed would have responded to the religious intervention more than those who were less committed. In addition, Rye and Pargament found that some participants reported using religious strategies to help them forgive; regardless of the condition they were assigned. Specifically, participants in both conditions reported praying for their offender and asking God for help forgiving. This finding demonstrates that although the religiously integrated condition did not appear to be more effective, religious participants nevertheless utilized their religious beliefs to assist them in the forgiveness process.

Likewise, Rye et al. (2005) conducted a similar study to further examine the effectiveness of religiously-integrated forgiveness interventions. Rye et al. (2005) again found that participants (N = 149 divorced individuals) in both the secular and religious conditions significantly increased forgiveness towards their offender. Rye et al. deemed these results to be consistent with their previous research and stated that the "pattern of results was remarkably similar" between the secular and religious condition (2005; pg. 890). In addition, the authors examined the relationship between participant religiosity and the effectiveness of the different interventions. Rye et al. reported finding no special benefits or additional forgiveness gains made by highly religious individuals in the religious condition. Essentially, regardless of participant religiosity, both conditions promoted change in participants.

The findings of Rye and Pargament (2002) and Rye et al. (2005) seem to indicate that regardless of religious commitment, participants were able to increase forgiveness after participation in a secular or religious intervention condition. Rye et al. suggest that one possible explanation for this similarity may be forgiveness strategies employed by participants in both conditions, such as asking God for help forgiving. Therefore, although

religious interventions were not explicitly utilized in the secular condition, participants still reported using religiously based strategies to increase forgiveness. This use of religious techniques may indicate, as Rye et al. propose, that for some individuals, "religion or spirituality may be inherent to the forgiveness process" (2005; pg. 890).

However, there may be alternate explanations for the above finding that no significant differences exist between religious and non-religious persons in the offering of forgiveness across intervention type (secular or religious). The use of religious strategies to aid forgiveness may suggest that Rye et al's (2005) participants were highly religious prior to the start of the study, leading them to naturally draw on their religious beliefs to forgive. Rye et al. recruited participants using a few different methods, one of which included announcements placed in local church bulletins. This type of recruitment may have led to a high number of religiously committed persons as participants. If the sample used by Rye and colleagues had been recruited from environments that were more secular in nature, a more representative sample may have been obtained.

To assess religiosity, Rye et al. (2005) administered the Hoge Intrinsic Religious Motivations scale (Hoge, 1972) and found mean participant scores of 29.38 (*SD* = 5.49) in the religiously integrated condition and 29.94 *(SD* = 5.23) in the secular condition. The Hoge Scale has a score range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating greater intrinsic religious motivation. Prior research, however, has reported Hoge Intrinsic Religious Motivation mean scale scores which are consistently lower than Rye et al's findings. For example, Brose et al. (2005) in research on the relationship between personality and forgiveness in 275 college students, reported a mean score on the Hoge scale of 26.16 *(SD* = 5.89). Falkenhain and Handal (2003), in research on attitudes towards death anxiety, death acceptance, and

religious beliefs in 71 elderly persons, reported a mean scale score of 23.83 (*SD* = 10.17). In addition, Narvaez et al. (1999) used the Hoge scale to explore the relationship between moral judgment and religiosity in Baptist and United Church of Christ participants. They reported a mean scale score of 26.78 (*SD* = 3.08) for Baptist participants and 19.28 (*SD* = 4.14) for United Church of Christ participants. Note that Narvaez et al. only sampled religious individuals and yet the mean scores on the Hoge scale were still lower than the mean scores reported by Rye et al. for their sample that was not intended to be highly religious.

Finally, the normative sample utilized in the development of the Hoge Intrinsic Religious Motivations measure had a mean scale score of 19.95, nearly 10 points (two standard deviations) lower than Rye et al's reported mean of 29. Rye et al's higher mean score on the Hoge scale appears to indicate that their sample is significantly more religious than the overall population. Again, as previously proposed, this finding could account for the reported use of religiously-based forgiveness strategies (such as asking God for help with the forgiveness process) by participants in both the religious and secular condition. If most participants were religiously committed, they would likely be comfortable freely implementing religious strategies to help them forgive. In addition, the potentially restricted range of religiosity might hide the effect of religious commitment in response to forgiveness treatment.

Although the Hoge scale might be used as a proxy for religious commitment, it is in reality a measure of Intrinsic Religious Motivations, which is based on the original religious orientation research by Allport and Ross (1967). Religious orientation is not a measure of religious commitment per se, but attempts to capture the way in which people are religious or what motivates them to be religious. As a result, researchers have critiqued the use of

measures of intrinsic religiosity (such as the Hoge Intrinsic Religious Motivations scale) to assess religious commitment (Kirkpatrick & Hood, 1990). Kirkpatrick and Hood suggested that multiple problems exist with measures of intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivation. They propose that scales of this nature do not define religious motivation adequately and concisely. Scales measuring religious motivation assess a wide variety of behaviors, attitudes, and cognitions without specifically defining and targeting religious motivation. Kirkpatrick and Hood state that religious motivation scales appear to actually measure personality variables and cognitive processes more closely than motivations. Due to this lack of clear definition, religious motivation instruments likely measure a number of spurious variables without targeting religious motivation. Second, Kirkpatrick and Hood suggest that measures of religious motivations may not be effective for measuring the religious commitment of non-religious persons. They propose that measures of religious motivation are worded and presented to participants in a way that assumes religiosity is valued and therefore, does not accurately gauge lack of religious motivation. Therefore, persons who are not highly religious are not able to sufficiently express themselves on measures of religious motivation. Due to the above criticisms, Kirkpatrick and Hood suggest that "researchers in the psychology of religion…pursue more promising methodological and theoretical directions" (1990; pg. 443). Thus, the use of measures of intrinsic religious motivation, such as the Hoge Intrinsic Religious Motivations scale utilized by Rye et al. (2005), may not be suitable measures of religious commitment.

Future Research Directions

Despite growing work on the relationship between religion and forgiveness, clearly there are gaps in this research which warrant further examination. Researchers have yet to

conclude if religious commitment influences one's ability to extend forgiveness. Thus far, the minimal research that exists on this subject is contradictory. Some correlational research has indicated that persons with high religious commitments may value forgiveness more and forgive more readily than persons who are not highly religious (Edwards et al., 2002; Exline et al, 2004; Greer et al., 2005; Tsang et al., 2005). However, other research does not support this, indicating that an individual's religious commitment does not seem to be indicative of their ability to forgive (Rye and Pargament, 2002; Rye et al., 2004). Due to the conflicting nature of previous research, we cannot conclude the extent to which religious commitment influences forgiveness. In addition, research to date has often been correlational and cross-sectional in nature, limiting researchers' ability to draw conclusions about the causal relationship between religiosity and forgiveness.

A few important questions emerge regarding forgiveness and religious commitment. First, do people with high religious commitment forgive more readily than persons with low or moderate religious commitments? Do people with strong religious commitment forgive more often and more easily than non-religious people? Or does religious commitment not affect the forgiveness process? Worthington's (1988) initial hypothesis suggested that a strong relationship exists between religious commitment and outward behaviors, cognitions, and values, and provides a starting point for research of this nature (Worthington, 1988). Likewise, Worthington, Sandage, and Berry (2000) have recognized religious commitment as a factor that, because of its influence on how individuals approach the world, may significantly impact forgiveness and warrants further exploration.

Second, researchers have begun to explore the role of religious tradition in either encouraging or hindering the forgiveness process. It appears that the value of forgiveness is

nearly universal; however, the extent to which each religion endorses and advocates forgiveness seems to vary (Rye et al. 2000). Therefore, do commonalities in the forgiveness process exist across religions? Differences in forgiveness amongst religious traditions have only been briefly examined and require further study. In addition, future research should explore the process through which various religious traditions approach and extend forgiveness.

Third, forgiveness research has just begun to uncover factors that help and hinder the forgiveness process for religious and non-religious individuals. Many questions arise regarding the type of forgiveness intervention that may be most beneficial for specific participants. For example, do religious persons forgive more readily after participation in religiously tailored forgiveness interventions? Likewise, do persons who are not religiously committed forgive more in secular groups? Or, in contrast, does the type of intervention utilized have no bearing on forgiveness? Some researchers have begun to explore the role of secular and religiously integrated interventions in promoting not only positive therapeutic outcomes, but also forgiveness, for the religious and non-religious (Rye and Pargament, 2002; Rye et al., 2005; Wade, Worthington, & Vogel, 2007). Further research is needed to examine the specific role of secular and religiously integrated interventions in the forgiveness process.

A final question that arises from research of this type is the influence of religious commitment on overall psychological health. Likewise, the relationship between forgiveness, psychological health, and religious commitment needs further exploration. In research to date, persons reporting that they are able to forgive an offender often also report decreased levels of depression and anxiety. In short, the act of forgiving appears to have a positive

effect on one's mental health (Baskin & Enright, 2004). What remains unanswered, however, is the degree to which forgiveness interventions influence various facets of psychological distress. For example, to what extent do forgiveness interventions reduce depression and anxiety? In addition, what is the relationship between religious commitment, forgiveness, and psychological health? Research is needed to determine if persons with high religious commitments not only forgive more after participation in forgiveness interventions, but also experience greater reductions of psychological distress after an intervention of this type. While researchers know that forgiving seems to reduce negative psychological symptoms, questions remain about why, how, and the extent to which various elements of mental health are increased by forgiveness interventions.

CHAPTER 2

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM: STUDY 1

Major religions of the world have emphasized, to various degrees, the importance of forgiveness (Rye et al., 2000). Within the past two decades, the field of psychology has begun to explore the value of forgiveness and the influence of forgiveness on mental health. Specifically, psychologists have begun researching possible connections between an individual's religious commitment and their motivation, desire, and willingness to extend forgiveness (Edwards et al., 2002; Exline et al., 2004; Greer et al., 2005). While a few hypotheses have been proposed regarding how religious commitment may affect one's behaviors (Worthington, 1988; Worthington et al., 1996), there is an overall lack of research exploring connections existing between these two constructs. Furthermore, the existing research on religious commitment and forgiveness provides somewhat contradictory results.

Hypotheses regarding religious commitment and forgiveness began with Worthington's (1988) ground-breaking article which proposed that individuals with high levels of religious commitment (defined as one's frequency of church attendance, participation in church activities, and prayer, bible study, or devotional behaviors) are likely to have specific value systems which are strongly influenced by their religious beliefs. In turn, Worthington proposed that these unique value systems help shape one's lifestyle. In an elaboration on this theory, the specific link between religious commitment and one's willingness to forgive was explored (Worthington et al., 1996). Worthington et al. proposed that people who fall at and above one standard deviation above the mean on religious commitment inventories will be more likely to behave in ways that coincide with their

religious beliefs. Seeing that most religious traditions value forgiveness, Worthington et al. suggest that highly religious persons should also be more likely to extend forgiveness.

Although some research has explored this link, there is a significant lack of research regarding the exact process of forgiveness for individuals of different religions. Research has not adequately explored how religious commitment is related to forgiveness or the influence of various religious beliefs on forgiveness. In addition, research to date has not examined connections between forgiveness and religious commitment in real-life settings with actual offenses. Thus far, self report and correlational research has provided an indication that people with significant religious commitments consider themselves to be more forgiving than do non-religious individuals (Edwards et al., 2002; Exline et al., 2004). Self-report measures, however, are not necessarily an accurate gauge of one's true behaviors. Furthermore, because forgiveness is emphasized as a positive virtue, religious people may be inclined to report that they are more forgiving than they really are. Research is needed to establish how religious commitment influences forgiveness and whether religious persons not only report being highly forgiving, but actually forgive real-life transgressions committed against them more readily.

Some research to date has indicated that religious beliefs and commitments may be somewhat inherent in the forgiveness process for many people. Specifically, prior research has compared a secular forgiveness intervention condition and a religiously integrated forgiveness intervention condition and found no differences in forgiveness across conditions; that is, participants in both conditions were able to extend forgiveness for an offender (Rye et al., 2005). In an especially relevant finding, Rye et al. asked all participants to report methods they utilized to help them forgive. Regardless of the intervention they were involved in,

many participants reported using religious methods, specifically asking God for help, as a part of their personal forgiveness process. This finding seems to indicate that despite the lack of religious emphasis in the secular condition, participants nevertheless used religious means to help them move toward forgiveness. Therefore, religious factors and themes may, in fact, be a part of forgiveness for many people.

The present dissertation includes two connected studies intended to explore in detail how an individual's religious commitment may affect their ability to extend forgiveness to a person in their life who committed an offense against them. The first study used in depth interviews to explore the ways religious people view and make use of their religious commitment in the forgiveness process. What factors (religious or otherwise) promote forgiveness for religiously committed people? Are certain beliefs about forgiveness universal across religious faiths? Furthermore, what specific religious teachings, philosophies, and traditions assist people in extending forgiveness? The second study examined associations between forgiveness and religious commitment with individuals who participated in treatments to explicitly promote forgiveness (for more details, see Chapters 4 and 5).

The present research will allow for a more accurate understanding of religious commitment and forgiveness than is afforded by previous correlational research. A deeper awareness of the factors that encourage and assist in the forgiveness process is of great clinical utility and can assist in the development of future forgiveness interventions. Furthermore, commonalities among religious traditions within the forgiveness process can be utilized to develop and implement future forgiveness interventions that are effective for people from various faith traditions.

CHAPTER: 3

METHOD: STUDY 1

Participants

Participants (N = 10) were residents of a medium sized Midwestern town. The majority of participants were Caucasian (90%) and female (80%) and ranged in age from 37 to 71 years (M = 55, SD = 12.59). All participants attended local churches, synagogues, and other religious organizations and reported a moderate to high religious commitment (M = 41.20, SD = 7.53 on the Religious Commitment Inventory-10, see Measures below). Half of those participating identified themselves as Christian (50%), with the remaining half identifying as Jewish (20%), Buddhist (10%), Muslim (10%), and Unitarian (10%).

Interviewer

For the present study, the majority (8) of the interviews were conducted by the author of this paper, a doctoral candidate in counseling psychology who had completed two years of individual therapy practicum and conducted prior research in the area of forgiveness. Two additional interviews were conducted by an honors undergraduate student who had been trained to complete the interviews. The training consisted of observing the first 8 interviews conducted by the author of this paper, with discussion and training following those interviews on the effective methods for conducting a semi-structured interview. All interviewers were supervised by a licensed psychologist.

Procedure

Before participant recruitment began, the study was approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB) of Iowa State University. Participants were recruited directly through local religious congregations. An undergraduate research assistant contacted ministers, rabbis, and

other heads of religious organizations to explain the study purpose and recruit potential participants. Religious leaders were encouraged to inform parishioners of the opportunity to participate. In addition, permission to advertise was obtained from religious leaders and announcements were placed in church bulletins, on bulletin boards, and were circulated, when appropriate, via e-mail. People were eligible to participate only if they had already forgiven an offense committed against them and were religious themselves. All participants were self-selected.

Those who were interested in participating contacted the researchers directly via email or telephone. When individuals contacted the researchers to participate, they were screened to ensure they had forgiven an offense committed against them. This was assessed through the use of a single item measure of forgiveness (see Measures section). In addition, potential participants were informed of basic study procedures. If persons elected to participate, the research assistant scheduled a 2 hour time slot for them to meet individually with the interviewer. If necessary, persons who were not eligible for the study (e.g., because they were still struggling with the hurt) were given information about local mental health agencies where they might address their concerns. Those who indicated that they would like to participate were mailed a welcome packet, which included the Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10; Worthington et al., 2003), a demographics questionnaire, the list of questions the interviewer would be asking them regarding their forgiveness experience (see Appendix A), a letter of welcome thanking them for participating, directions and parking information, and lastly, an informed consent for participants to read and sign. Participants were encouraged to complete the RCI-10, demographics questionnaire, and informed consent document and bring them to the interview or to arrive a few minutes early to complete the

necessary paperwork prior to the start of the interview. Informed consent was then discussed prior to the interview and any questions that participants had were answered at that time.

Once the necessary paperwork was completed, participants were introduced to the interviewer and the interview began. The interviews ranged from approximately 60 minutes to 120 minutes in duration and averaged approximately 90 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured in nature. The interviewer utilized a list of 11 questions (see Appendix A) to help guide and structure the interview, such as "What do you believe your religious tradition says about forgiveness?" and "What motivated you to forgive your offender?" Questions were open-ended to encourage participants to provide detailed information about their experience. The interview format was semi-structured so that the interviewer could ask follow-up questions as needed for additional detail. Participants were given $20 for their participation. After the interview was completed, participants were thanked for their participation, verbally debriefed, and dismissed.

Measures

Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10). The RCI-10 is a ten item scale used to assess an individual's current level of religious commitment and religiosity (Worthington et al., 2003). The RCI-10 includes items such as "It is important to me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and reflection" and "My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life". The RCI-10 has been widely validated, has strong internal reliability (Cronbach's *alpha* of .93) and strong test re-test reliability (Cronbach's *alpha* of .87; Worthington et al., 2003). The RCI-10 has been shown to highly correlate with additional instruments measuring spirituality and religiosity (Worthington et al., 2003). In addition, for an undergraduate population (N = 132), Worthington et al. report a mean score of 25.7 (SD =

11.9) on the RCI-10. Lastly, mean scores for secular populations have been shown to range between 21-26 (standard deviations range between 10-12); whereas mean scores for religious populations are typically higher. Worthington et al. found that Christians recruited directly from churches had a mean score of 39 and clients from Christian agencies had a mean score of 37.

Demographics data. A few brief questions were asked to ascertain demographic information about the participants. If willing, participants reported their sex, age, religious affiliation, and duration which they have been involved in their religious affiliation.

Single-Item Measure of Forgiveness. To ensure that persons participating believed that they had forgiven their offender, participants ranked on a five-point Likert style scale (e.g., 1 = "Not at all" to 5 = "Completely") the degree to which they had forgiven their offender. Only participants ranking the extent to which they had forgiven as a 4 ("very much" forgiven) or 5 ("completely" forgiven) were eligible to participate.

Research Questions

All of the major world religions emphasize, to varying degrees, forgiveness and the importance of forgiving one another. However, each religion has a unique perspective on why forgiveness is important, the means through which forgiveness is offered, and the religious basis for forgiveness. Study 1 was designed with these basic premises in mind and implemented to explore the religious elements in the forgiveness process according to religious individuals who had successfully forgiven some significant hurt in their life.

In the present study, the question of central importance was: what is the perceived relationship between forgiveness and religion among religious people? What similarities and differences exist within the forgiveness process? Second, religious persons often refer to

religious texts and passages in support of forgiveness. Therefore, what specific religious references or passages explain the importance of forgiveness for persons of faith? And do common themes arise across religions? Third, what additional religious elements may prevent or assist the forgiveness process? For example, what is the role of one's community of faith in promoting forgiveness? Lastly, each religion justifies the importance of forgiveness through slightly varied means. Therefore, what specific religious beliefs motivate religious individuals to forgive? What faith tenants help prompt persons to extend forgiveness?

Because forgiveness is emphasized differently in each religion, the present research aimed to explore precise beliefs about forgiveness that exist across religious traditions. Common religious themes and beliefs that promote forgiveness were explored. Ultimately, this research sought to understand whether religious factors (and if so, which ones) encourage forgiveness.

CHAPTER 4

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM: STUDY 2

Researchers have proposed that religious commitment may be associated with one's ability and desire to extend forgiveness (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000; Exline et al., 2004). Recently, research has begun exploring the merit of this theory. To date, findings are mixed with some research indicating that religious commitment and forgiveness may be related (Edwards et al., 2002), while other research proposes that forgiveness may not be influenced by one's religious commitment (Rye et al., 2005).

As interest in forgiveness and religious commitment has grown, researchers have begun to examine how forgiveness can be promoted and what specific factors encourage or prevent forgiveness. Furthermore, research has explored the usefulness of interventions designed explicitly to promote forgiveness and has found that group forgiveness interventions can effectively help persons forgive (Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). As forgiveness research has evolved, it has been suggested that, because forgiveness is a valued virtue in many religious traditions, people who are religious may respond to forgiveness treatments more readily and forgive with more ease (Rye et al., 2000).

Some initial research has been conducted to address this question. In one study, two types of explicit forgiveness interventions were compared, one with a secular focus and one with a religious focus (Rye et al., 2005). Despite the distinct focus of each condition, no significant differences between conditions were evident. In a second finding most relevant to the present study, this research found no additional benefits for highly religious participants in the religious intervention condition. That is, all participants appear to have forgiven to the same extent and religious commitment was not associated with one's ability or desire to offer

forgiveness. Rye et al's findings may indicate that no additional benefits or gains exist for highly religious persons who participate in religious interventions and that regardless of religious faith; persons are equally likely and able to forgive.

In contrast, some studies suggest that strong associations may exist between religious commitment and forgiveness. In this research, people with high religious commitments are more likely to see themselves as highly forgiving (Edwards et al., 2002; Exline et al., 2004). In addition, trait forgivingness, defined as the "tendency to forgive transgressions over time and across a wide variety of interpersonal circumstances", may play a significant role in one's ability to forgive situation-specific offenses (Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007; pg. 200). Research of this nature indicates that strong associations appear to exist between religious commitment and trait forgivingness, and trait forgivingness and forgiveness for specific offenses.

Although these studies indicate that a connection exists between religious commitment and forgiveness, this research is only self-report and so it may not provide an accurate reflection of one's actual behavior. Major religious traditions emphasize the importance of forgiveness as a positive act and an element of virtuous behavior (Rye et al., 2000). Due to this positive view of forgiveness, people (particularly religious people) may feel compelled to report that they are forgiving, when in fact they are not as forgiving as they present themselves to be. In essence, social desirability may lead participants to portray themselves in an overly positive light. What remains to be determined is the extent to which findings of this nature will translate to real-life situations.

The first purpose of Study 2 was to explore the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness after participants had completed a psychological intervention

designed specifically to promote forgiveness. Therefore, the central question of the present study was: when controlling for pre-treatment forgiveness, is religious commitment associated with forgiveness following an intervention designed to promote forgiveness?

Second, the present study also explored associations between psychological symptoms and religious commitment. Researchers have suggested that religious commitment may help decrease psychological distress (Hackney and Sanders, 2003). In addition, researchers have proposed that religious commitment is associated with increased self-esteem and decreased depression (Commerford & Rezinkoff, 1996; Gartner, 1996). Therefore, the present study explored the relationship between religious commitment and psychological distress after participation in a forgiveness promoting intervention.

Lastly, the present study also examined variables that may be associated with religious commitment and forgiveness. Specifically, certain factors may be possible mediators of the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness. One such variable is trait forgivingness, which has been shown to influence one's propensity to forgive situation specific offenses (Berry et al., 2001; Brown & Phillips, 2005) and is related to religious commitment (Edwards et al., 2002). Therefore, trait forgivingness was explored as a potential mediator of the relationship between forgiveness and religious commitment.

CHAPTER: 5

METHOD: STUDY 2

Participants

Participants (*N* = 298) were from three pre-existing data sets each collected within the past 6 years to examine the process of forgiving as a result of group forgiveness interventions. The main purpose of these studies was to compare the efficacy of different treatments for promoting forgiveness. However, in each study religious commitment was collected as part of the background information on the participants. The religious commitment data has not been analyzed in any of these studies.

Participants from Sample 1 and 3 were college aged students enrolled in Introductory Psychology classes from two medium sized universities. Participants in Sample 2 were residents of a medium sized Midwestern town. Of the 298 total participants in all three data sets, 83 were male (27.8%) and 213 were female (71.5%) (two participants did not respond). The majority of participants, 65.1% (n = 194), identified themselves as Caucasian. In addition, 20.1% (n = 60) of participants identified themselves as African American, 6.7% (n = 20) as Asian American, 3% (n = 9) as Hispanic/Latino, and 2% (n = 6) declined to answer. Furthermore, 3% (n = 9) of participants identified their race as “other”. Ages ranged from 18-68; the average age of participants was 24.21 (SD = 10.8). Religious affiliation varied among the participants with 47.7% (n = 142) of participants identified as Protestant, 20.4% (n = 61) as Catholic, 1.3% (n = 4) as Hindu, 1% (n = 3) as Muslim, 0.7% (n = 2) as Buddhist, 1% (n = 3) as Jewish and 0.3% (n = 1) as Mormon. Lastly, 15.7% (n = 47) of respondents indicated that they did not have a religious affiliation and 8.7% (n = 26) of respondents indicated that

their religious affiliation fit into the “other” category. No response was given for 3% (n = 9) of participants.

Group Facilitators

Facilitators for all groups were trained specifically in leading and conducting forgiveness intervention groups as well as alternate treatment groups. Facilitators were supervised closely throughout the research process by licensed psychologists and were given regular supervision. Facilitators were graduate students who were enrolled in an APA-approved doctoral program in counseling psychology and had completed at least two semesters of individual therapy practicum and a course in group psychotherapy. One additional facilitator was a pre-licensure faculty member in an APA-approved counseling psychology program at a medium sized university. In addition, each facilitator led a forgiveness condition and an alternate condition to reduce potential facilitator effects on the study outcome.

Procedure

Before participant recruitment began, each study was approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB) at the university where the study was completed. Participants in two of the three samples (Sample 1 and 3) were recruited through undergraduate psychology classes and bulletin boards that advertised psychology research participation opportunities. Students were eligible to participate in the study if they could recall a time when they had been hurt or offended in a significant way, they believed that they had not moved beyond the offense, and they wanted to work to forgive their offender. Participants were then randomly assigned to either a forgiveness intervention condition, an alternate treatment condition, or a wait-list control condition. The forgiveness condition in all three studies was based on Worthington’s

Pyramid Model to REACH forgiveness (1998) and followed a manual designed explicitly to encourage forgiveness (for an example of the manuals see Appendix B). The alternate treatment conditions varied across the studies (see alternative treatment section below).

In Sample 2, participants were community members recruited to participate through advertisements in local newspapers and fliers placed throughout community areas. All advertisements invited persons who had a desire to overcome a specific offense in their lives to participate in a study on the effectiveness of counseling interventions for those seeking to overcome a prior hurt. No specific mention of forgiveness was offered at this time. The announcements, bulletin boards, and advertisements included contact information such as phone numbers and e-mail addresses of the researchers, allowing interested individuals to gain information about participating. As in the other two studies, persons were eligible to participate if they could think of a time when they had been hurt or offended and felt that they had not been able to forgive the offender, but desired to do so. Those who were not eligible for the study were given information about local mental health agencies where they might address their concerns.

After the initial phone or e-mail correspondence with researchers, participants were randomly assigned to participate in the forgiveness intervention condition, the alternative treatment condition, or the wait-list control condition. Before the start of the first intervention session, participants in all three studies completed pre-test measures.

In all three studies, participants received some type of compensation for their participation. In Sample 1, students received a small amount of course credit in exchange for their participation. In Sample 2 on the last day of the intervention, after participants had completed post-treatment measures, they received a small monetary compensation ($25).

Lastly, participants in Sample 3 received both a small amount of course credit for their participation and were compensated monetarily with $15 each time they completed questionnaires. After the study concluded, participants in all three studies were thanked for their participation and debriefed regarding the study purpose.

Forgiveness Intervention Condition. The primary goal of all three studies was to compare the efficacy of a treatment to promote forgiveness with alternative treatments. Therefore, all three samples included a forgiveness intervention designed explicitly to promote forgiveness. The forgiveness treatment tested in each study was based on Worthington's Pyramid Model to REACH Forgiveness (1998). This treatment modality has been utilized in a variety of prior research (for a review see Wade et al., 2005). This intervention includes techniques that are categorized into five components represented by the acronym "REACH". The first step, recalling (R) the hurt encourages participants to remember the hurt they have experienced in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. The second step encourages individuals to develop empathy (E) for their offender. The next step teaches participants the concept of giving "the gift" of forgiveness as an altruistic (A) response to the offender's actions. Fourth, individuals are encouraged to commit (C) to forgiving their offender. Lastly, participants learn how to hold (H) onto the forgiveness they have achieved and the skills they have learned during the intervention. Furthermore, in addition to the 5 intervention steps detailed above, the intervention discusses definitions of forgiveness and helps participants to understand differences between forgiveness and related, but distinct concepts, such as reconciliation and condoning or pardoning an offense. (For more detail about the REACH model see Chapter 1).

The duration of the forgiveness intervention condition varied across the three studies. The duration of the forgiveness intervention group was 6 hours in Sample 1 (two three-hour sessions), 6 hours in Sample 2 (four 90-minute sessions), and 9 hours in Sample 3 (six 90-minute sessions). All forgiveness intervention conditions followed a specific manual (for an example, see Appendix B).

Alternative Treatment Conditions. All three studies included some form of an alternative treatment. In contrast to the forgiveness condition, the alternative treatment conditions did not include any interventions that specifically addressed forgiveness. Sample 1 used a stress-reduction condition as the alternative treatment. This condition was designed to help participants reduce stress in their lives through techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, and visualization. The stress reduction alternate condition also included information about stress, the negative accumulative effect of stress, and how to reduce stress. The alternative treatment condition matched the forgiveness treatment group in duration, 6 hours total (two, three-hour sessions).

Study 2 also included an alternative treatment condition, which was designed to mimic group psychotherapy. Specifically, this general counseling intervention was a short-term adaptation of the Yalom and Leszcz (2005) group psychotherapy model outlined in the book *Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*. In this condition, participants were encouraged to share content from their own lives and their reactions to one another within the group. Group facilitators provided enough structure to create an emotionally safe and accepting environment and helped participants to discuss their concerns with one another. Facilitators also helped participants to understand group processes and to share their thoughts, reactions, and feelings in the “here-and-now” and understand how those patterns

might be similar to interactions they have with people in their lives. The facilitators attempted to promote the curative factors outlined by Yalom as being the most predictive of group therapy success. This condition was 6 hours in length (comprised of four 90-minute sessions).

Lastly, Sample 3 included an alternate treatment condition aimed at reducing anger. Interventions in this condition included relaxation strategies, discussing anger triggers, and allowing participants a chance to share their past experiences with other members of the group. Information and personal sharing about the different ways that people can express anger was also provided. Explicit efforts were made during the creation, preparation, and implementation of this treatment to avoid any interventions that would overlap with the forgiveness treatment, with the exception of setting the ground rules for the group (e.g., confidentiality) and allowing participants time and space to talk about their respective hurts. Treatment sessions were 90 minutes in length and met twice a week over the course of three weeks, for a total of 9 hours of intervention time.

Wait-list control condition. Participants in this condition received no treatment while the treatment conditions were conducted. They completed pretest and posttest measures on the same schedule as participants in the treatment groups. After the study, they were offered the opportunity to participate in the forgiveness treatment group. Sample 2 and 3 included waitlist conditions, Sample 1 did not.

Measures

Religious Commitment. Religious commitment was measured in all studies using the Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10; Worthington et al., 2003). The RCI-10 is a ten

item scale used to assess an individual's current level of religious commitment and religiosity. The RCI-10 was described in detail in Chapter 3.

Trait forgivingness. Trait forgivingness has been referred to as one's ability to forgive consistently across time and various situations (Berry et al. 2005). The present study utilized the Trait Forgivingness Scale (TFS, Berry et al., 2005), a 10-item self-report scale, to gauge trait forgivingness. Sample items include, "I am a forgiving person" and "I can usually forget an insult". Prior research has used this measure and reported that the TFS correlates with other measures of forgiveness and trait forgivingness, specifically the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (TNTF; Berry et al., 2001). In addition, the TFS has been shown to have adequate internal reliability (Cronbach *alpha* of .74 - .80; Berry et al., 2005).

Revenge and Avoidance Motivations. The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998) is a 12-item questionnaire designed to assess motivations to seek revenge against and to avoid an offender. Participants rated their responses from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) on a Likert-type scale. The TRIM contains two subscales, the revenge and avoidance subscales, consisting of five and seven questions, respectively. Sample questions on the revenge subscale include, "I am going to get even" and "I wish that something bad would happen to him/her". Sample items on the avoidance subscale include, "I cut off the relationship with him/her" and "I don't trust him/her". Past research has shown estimates of internal reliability coefficients to be .90 on the revenge subscale and .86-.94 on the avoidance subscale (McCullough et al., 1998). The eight-week test-retest reliability correlations are .53 (Revenge) and .44 (Avoidance). The TRIM has been shown to correlate with a number of other forgiveness measures, including single item measures of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998).

Empathy. Batson's Empathy Adjectives were used in all three samples to measure participants' empathy toward their offenders (Batson, Bolen, Cross & Neuringer-Benfiel, 1986). This scale consists of eight words (such as sympathetic, compassionate, and tender) that each describe a particular affect. Participants rated, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (extremely), the degree to which they believe the word given described their feelings for their offender. Batson's Empathy Adjectives have also been shown to correlate with other instruments measuring empathy. Internal reliability estimates range from .79 to .95 (Batson et. al., 1986).

Psychological Symptoms. The Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) (Derogatis, 1993) was used to assess psychological symptoms. The BSI contains 53 items which comprise nine primary symptom dimensions scales and three global indices. Participants rated the degree to which they had experienced each symptom within the last week from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). Subscale scores were calculated by summing the items in each subscale and dividing the composite score by the number of items in the respective subscale (for example, the total hostility score divided by 5). One specific index of the BSI, the Global Severity Index (GSI), was utilized to assess overall psychological distress. The primary use of the GSI is to gauge distress when "a single summary measure is required" (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). Cronbach's *alphas* on the BSI subscales range from .71 to .85. Research has demonstrated good test-retest reliability on the GSI (Cronbach's *alpha* of .90) (Derogatis, 1993). In addition, the BSI has been shown to highly correlate with certain scales of the MMPI-2, indicating good convergent validity (Derogatis, 1993).

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. Regardless of treatment type (forgiveness or alternative condition), highly religious individuals will forgive more over time. In the present study, forgiveness is defined as increasing empathy, decreasing revenge, and decreasing avoidance towards an offender. Essentially, religious commitment will be related to forgiveness following treatment after controlling for pre-treatment forgiveness.

Hypothesis 2. A relationship will exist between religious commitment and psychological distress. Specifically, persons with high religious commitments will report greater reductions in psychological distress over time (from pre to post treatment) as measured by the Global Severity Index (GSI) on the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI).

Hypothesis 3. Trait forgivingness, a dispositional variable that may predict one's ability to extend forgiveness, will be explored as a potential link between religious commitment and forgiveness. Specifically, it is hypothesized that trait forgivingness will mediate the relationship between forgiveness and religious commitment and therefore, will be a predictor of forgiveness-related outcomes. Trait forgivingness will be examined as a potential mediator of religious commitment and forgiveness at time 1 (pre-treatment) and time 2 (post-treatment).

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS: STUDY 1

Main Analysis

Interview Analysis. A common qualitative analysis method, Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), was used to analyze the qualitative element of the present study. After interviews were completed and transcribed, interviews were read and reviewed with the goal of identifying main themes within each interview and common themes across interviews. Themes of interest included participants' discussion of factors that motivated them to forgive their offender and strategies they utilized to forgive. Themes were subsequently coded into brief phrases used to describe each theme and the frequency of themes (first within each individual interview, and second, across all interviews) was calculated. After an initial review of the participant data, 96 preliminary themes were identified (refer to Table 7 in Appendix B for a comprehensive listing of themes discussed by participants). In addition, interviews were examined to determine the type of offense participants had forgiven (see Table 2). The majority of participants (60%) stated that the offense they endured involved verbal, emotional, physical or sexual abuse from one or both of their parents.

Next, after preliminary themes were identified, they were reviewed, revised, or excluded from analysis as appropriate. A total of 5 preliminary themes were excluded from the analysis. A few themes were excluded because a participant discussed their religious beliefs, but not in direct reference to why or how they forgave their offender.

Table 2

Types of Offenses Reported by Participants.

Offense Category	Example	*n*	%
Interpersonal hurt (non-sexual relationship)	Betrayal by friend	2	20
Interpersonal hurt (sexual or intimate relationship)	Infidelity	2	20
Parental abuse or neglect	Sexual abuse by father, severe neglect by mother	6	60
Total		10	100

Other themes were excluded due to lack of clarity on the part of the participant or transcriptionist. After irrelevant and unclear themes were excluded, 91 preliminary themes remained. Subsequently, the 91 remaining preliminary themes were grouped into major themes (such as “I forgave because I wanted to reduce anger in my life” and “I turned to my religious community for support throughout the forgiveness process”). All major themes were chosen based on two requirements. First, to be classified as major, a theme needed to be mentioned by at least 3 separate participants. (However, one exception to this theme was made in order to include data obtained from Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist participants. Because the present study did not include 3 individual participants from each of these religious traditions, interview data from Jewish, Muslim, or Buddhist participants was frequently classified as a major theme even if only mentioned once. Themes mentioned by one participant from a minority religious group were classified as major if they referred

explicitly to an important tenant of faith unique to that particular religious group. For example, although only one Buddhist participant mentioned “Striving to reach Enlightenment” as a motivation to offer forgiveness, this was classified as a major theme. Second, to be classified as major, each theme needed to represent a unique concept not referenced in another major theme. In essence, every major theme represents an exclusive idea not found in other themes. Following this classification, 32 major themes which had been endorsed by at least three separate participants (with the exception noted above) and represented a concept unique to each theme were identified.

In accordance with the third and final step of Grounded Theory, after themes had been developed and finalized, relationships between themes were explored (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). At this particular step in Grounded Theory, a classification system was developed with the goal of explaining how religious beliefs may influence one’s desire and ability to forgive. To better understand and conceptualize the 32 major themes, themes were organized and divided into the following distinct categories: 1) factors that motivated individuals to forgive (*why* they forgave) and 2) methods or strategies they implemented to reach forgiveness (*how* they forgave; See Table 3).

After each theme was organized as representing the “why” or “how” of forgiveness, themes were further divided into the subcategories of “religious” and “secular” elements of forgiveness. The distinction between religious and secular elements was made by closely examining phrasing used by each participant when describing what motivated them to forgive and strategies they used to forgive. When participants directly discussed religious elements (God, prayer, karma, etc.), a theme was categorized as religious. In contrast,

Table 3

Religious and Secular Motivations to Forgive and Strategies Used to Forgive.

	Motivation to Forgive *(why participants forgave)*:	Strategies Used to Forgive *(how participants forgave)*:
Religious Elements	To draw closer to God (4) Be like Christ/God (4) Forgive others because God forgives us (4) Karma (1) Move towards Enlightenment (1) Prophets model forgiveness (1) Jewish tradition emphasizes present and not living in past (1)	Looked to my relationship with God for strength (6) Prayer (for self, offender, or forgiveness) (6) Good/Growth (religious in nature) arising from offense (5) Reading religious texts (4) Consulting a religious leader (3) Support of religious community (3) Lord's Prayer (3) Days of Atonement (2) Religious study (1) Tashlich (Jewish ritual) (1)
Secular Elements	Forgive to be forgiven by others (8) Achieve peace (6) Decrease bitterness (6) For community and society as a whole (5) Decrease anger (4) As a "gift" to myself (4) To be myself/"free to be who I am" (3) Energy would be better spent elsewhere (3)	Developing empathy towards offender (8) Focusing on positive qualities of offender (8) Good/Growth (personal in nature) arising from offense (7) Spent time alone (5) Humanity (belief that we all make mistakes) (4) Attend therapy (4) Acceptance that offender will not change (3)

Note. Parentheses denote number of participants endorsing theme.

elements not directly referring to faith, religious commitment, and/or religious beliefs were classified as secular. In addition, a distinction was made with regard to the centrality of a religious element to each theme. When a theme was expressly dependent upon religiosity or a religious element, it was classified as religious. When it was not expressly dependent on a religious element, it was classified as secular. For example, it is possible to empathize with an offender without utilizing religious beliefs to do so. However, it is not possible to separate religion and religious beliefs from a behavior such as prayer or consulting a religious leader.

In summary, methods used to achieve forgiveness without the application of any religious theme or belief were classified as secular, whereas themes requiring the application of a faith-based belief or method were considered religious. Therefore, four total categories (religious motivations to forgive, secular motivations to forgive, religious strategies used to forgive, and secular strategies used to forgive) were identified. For example, the major theme "To draw closer to God" was classified as a religious motivation to forgive. In contrast, "Developing empathy towards my offender" was classified as a secular strategy used to forgive.

Once coding was completed, reliability checks were implemented. Two undergraduate research assistants were assigned to read three randomly chosen participant interviews and identify motivations to forgive offenders and/or strategies participants utilized to reach forgiveness. Once coding was completed, themes were reviewed for consistency (see Table 8 in Appendix A). The major themes identified in participant interviews will be discussed in the following sections.

Experiences of Forgiveness

The process of forgiveness and the motivation to forgive is unique for each individual. Persons are motivated to forgive by a variety of factors and often utilize a range of strategies to obtain forgiveness. However, despite differences in offense severity in the present study (offenses ranged from experiencing the betrayal of a friend to enduring sexual and physical abuse by a parent), participants expressed a number of shared experiences regarding how and why they forgave.

First, participants uniformly stated that they invested a great deal of time, effort, and thought into their forgiveness journey. Participants did not take forgiveness (either the meaning of forgiveness or the forgiveness process itself) lightly; instead, they deliberately and thoughtfully pursued forgiveness for the sake of their offender and for themselves. Although participants found forgiveness important for various religious and secular reasons, it was clear that across interviews every participant viewed forgiveness as important and beneficial. Second, the process of forgiveness was a long and intentional journey for most participants. With the exception of two individuals (one of whom described forgiveness as occurring over the course of a few weeks and another who stated she worked towards forgiveness over the course of years, but forgave in a brief moment), participants forgave over the course of months, years, or even decades. Many participants described forgiveness as a “journey” and a “process”, which they achieved only when they were “ready” to forgive. Individuals were active participants in their forgiveness journeys and often described seeking out reading materials, consulting with religious leaders, spending time alone, and engaging in prayer or meditation as pathways to reach forgiveness.

Third, participants described forgiveness as multi-faceted and, therefore, all participants utilized both religious and secular elements while forgiving. Participants did not

approach forgiveness as something that was only religious in nature, but instead actively utilized religious and secular elements they believed would help them to forgive. Thus, none of the participants approached forgiveness as a solely religious or solely secular process, instead they merged their religious faith with secular strategies. For example, one participant described engaging in a range of activities in an effort to forgive. She stated that in addition to attending church services and praying, she also participated in a number of artistic activities, such as painting, as a way to help her express emotions associated with the offense. In short, she did not turn exclusively to religious or secular pursuits in order to forgive; but merged elements of her religious faith (such as prayer) with secular elements (such as artistic pursuits).

Fourth, participants expressed a variety of emotions accompanying forgiveness. Every participant expressed some type of gratitude or appreciation for their ability to forgive and move forward from an offense. Participants universally viewed forgiveness as something positive and beneficial in their lives. At the time of the interviews, a few participants were in ongoing relationships with their offender (either through marriage or friendship) and therefore, stated they have been able to continue with the relationship because of their ability to forgive. Participants also expressed that, as they forgave, they were able to decrease anger and bitterness towards their offender and were able to gain an increased sense of peace. In addition, participants viewed forgiveness as a means through which they could obtain contentment, joy, and, as one participant stated, the ability to be “free to be who I am”. A common reaction among participants was a sense of relief, peace, calmness, and the absence of a burden after forgiving an offender. Many individuals described coming to a “place of forgiveness” and experiencing a strong sense of peace, understanding, and contentment. One

individual stated that forgiveness allowed her to feel “centered” in her life. Forgiveness was seen not only as a way to renew one’s sense of self, but also a powerful opportunity to decrease negative emotions and release the pain of unforgiveness.

Religious Elements of Forgiveness

An individual’s choice to extend forgiveness can be motivated by a number of factors. Likewise, people can offer forgiveness to offenders by using a variety of strategies. Participants in the present study cited multiple reasons why they valued forgiveness and therefore wished to forgive. Likewise, they reported a wide range of religious strategies they implemented in an effort to forgive.

Religious Motivations to Forgive. Participants endorsed a number of religious motivations to forgive; however, of the four categories identified in the present study (religious motivations, secular motivations, religious strategies, and secular strategies), religious motivations to forgive were cited the least (mentioned by participants a mere 16 times, whereas secular motivations to forgive were mentioned 39 times). The most common motivations to forgive were “To draw closer to God”, “To be like Christ/To be like God” and the belief that persons should “Forgive others because God forgives us”, each of which were discussed by 4 participants.

The major theme “To draw closer to God” encompasses a number of forgiveness motivations expressed by participants. Participants endorsing this theme as a motivation to forgive directly stated that they sought forgiveness as a way to draw close to and to improve their relationship with the Divine. Participants viewed forgiveness as a pathway through which closeness with God was possible. In addition, participants describing this theme stated that not forgiving was placing a wall or some type of barrier between themselves and God.

Forgiving an offender was seen as a way to break down this barrier and renew their closeness with God. One participant described not forgiving as a decision to "wall myself off from God's love" and that eventually forgiving the offense was a choice to grow closer to God's love. Yet another participant stated that she forgave because "when we are out of joint with others, we're out of joint with God". Forgiveness was frequently seen as a powerful way to become, as a participant stated, "spiritually fit" in the eyes of God.

Second, "To be like God/Christ" was cited by 4 participants (3 Christian participants and one Muslim participant) as a religious motivation to forgive. Participants stated that they felt called to model God's/Christ's behaviors of offering love, care and forgiveness and in this way they became more God-like or Christ-like. A third and related theme, which was also discussed by 4 participants is the religious motivation that we "Forgive others because God forgives us". Christian participants emphasized that in Christ's death on the cross, God forgave humanity for sinfulness and, as one participant stated, "We forgive because Jesus died for our sins." Therefore, participants stated that they believed they should forgive when others offended or hurt them.

Religious Strategies Used to Forgive. Participants reported using a variety of religious strategies, such as prayer, asking for God's help, and reading religious texts, to forgive their offender. A number of participants explicitly stated that their faith was instrumental in allowing them to forgive. One participant described her faith as a "medium" through which she was able to extend forgiveness to her offender. Another participant stated that her religious beliefs "plowed the ground so that the Sprit could somehow work and cause this (forgiveness) to happen" and that without a foundation of faith, she may not have been able to forgive.

Two significant patterns emerged from the analysis of strategies utilized to forgive. First, regardless of the precise strategies implemented, all participants stated that they used multiple strategies to help them forgive. Participants mentioned activities such as turning to their religious community for support, praying for their offender, consulting religious leaders, and reading religious texts, all in an effort to achieve forgiveness. However, participants utilized these strategies with varying frequency and for differing durations. For example, some participants reported that prayer was a fundamental part of forgiveness, whereas other participants reported only praying periodically. Therefore, although many commonalities existed among participants, there was not a fixed pattern of strategies all participants utilized to forgive; instead, individuals seemed to pick and choose a specific combination of religious strategies that appealed to them.

Second, there were significant commonalities in strategies utilized across religious traditions. For example, Jewish participants, as well as Christian and Buddhist participants, mentioned turning to their religious communities for strength and support. Muslim and Christian participants mentioned reading and referencing the Quran and Bible, respectively, for assistance, guidance, and inspiration. Furthermore, participants of all faith traditions mentioned the importance of prayer or meditation in their forgiveness journey. With the exception of discussions regarding Yom Kippur and Tashlich, which were mentioned only by Jewish participants, and reaching Enlightenment, which was only described by a Buddhist participant, the remaining religious themes were discussed by Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim participants alike. This seems to indicate that certain elements of forgiveness are common across religions and may be such essential elements of forgiveness that they are frequently utilized by persons of various faith traditions.

Overall, participants discussed implementing religious strategies 34 times (similarly, secular strategies were mentioned 39 times) in an effort to forgive. The most common themes were “Looking to my relationship with God for strength” (mentioned by 6 participants), “Prayer” (6), and lastly “Reading religious texts” (4).

Although the above themes were the most commonly mentioned religious strategies utilized to forgive, one type of strategy (finding good/growth as a result of an offense) was mentioned by nearly all (9 out of 10) participants as a significant theme which enabled them to forgive. Specifically, 5 participants mentioned this theme from a religious context (labeled as “Spiritual good/growth arising from the offense”) and 7 participants discussed this theme within a secular context (labeled as “Personal good/growth arising from the offense”). In addition, 3 participants referred to this theme in both a religious and secular manner.

Despite the severity of hurts described during the interviews (see Table 2), nearly all participants were adamant that a key aspect of their forgiveness journey was being able to reframe the hurt committed against them in a way that focused on some type of positive outcome that developed as a result of their experience. The positive elements participants experienced due to their hurts varied widely. Participants who discussed positive spiritual outgrowth of their offense stated that because of the offense committed against them and the process of forgiveness, they were able to strongly increase their faith in God and their religious commitment overall. These participants reported that without the offense they experienced, their faith would not be what it is today. One participant stated that the experience of forgiving made her faith “more grown-up” whereas another participant stated that the offense she endured led her to “depend more on my relationship with God”. Another participant who endured severe abuse as a child stated that she would not choose to “go back

and change things" because the offense "got me here spiritually". In addition, three participants stated that they were able to identify areas of spiritual and personal good that occurred in their lives as a result of their offense. For example, one participant stated that the offense, "helped my faith grow", but also described feeling as if the offense helped her develop into a better person. In this way, participants were able to identify both spiritual and personal positive outcomes of the offenses they experienced.

In addition to the above theme, a number of other religious strategies were used by participants to help them forgive. "Looking to my relationship with God for strength" was cited by 6 participants as a vital component of forgiveness. This theme encompasses a number of thoughts and ideas expressed by participants. Participants often stated that they looked to their relationship with God and God's love for them as the means through which forgiveness was possible. In addition, participants stated that their relationship with God gave them the strength, determination, and mindset necessary to forgive. Others described their relationship with God as giving them a sense of "openness" to the possibility of forgiveness. Some participants stated that by feeling God's presence with them, they were able to offer forgiveness to their offender. In general, participants described a sense of comfort and strength as an outgrowth of their relationship with God, which in turn empowered them to forgive.

Second, 6 participants cited "Prayer" as a fundamental part of forgiveness (on a related note, one participant mentioned, in addition to prayer, that she meditated about her offense and the individual who hurt her). Prayer took many forms for participants in the present study, including praying for their offender, for themselves, and for forgiveness in general. One participant stated she often prayed to God to help her "carry the cost" of her

offense (specifically the pain and difficulty of the hurt). Another participant stated she prayed that God would forgive her offender, thereby enabling her to also extend forgiveness. In addition, she reported praying that God would allow her to learn and grow from the offense. One participant stated she frequently prayed for her offender that God would "bring him to the right path". Still others described asking God to support their journey of forgiveness. A Buddhist participant stated that she prayed to a "Higher power" for courage to face the pain of her offense and, in addition, to give her the ability to examine the pain she may have caused others throughout her life. Many individuals stated that prayer gave them strength to move forward with their forgiveness journey. Regardless of the exact focus of their prayer, participants stated that prayer was an important means through which they were able to forgive.

Third and finally, 4 participants stated that reading religious texts (specifically the Bible and the Quran) helped them to forgive their offender. Participants mentioned specific verses and parables of forgiveness in the Bible. Two participants discussed the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31) as instrumental in allowing them to forgive. A few participants also mentioned the story of Jesus encouraging people to forgive "70 times 7 times" (Matthew 18:22) and lastly, one participant discussed 1st Corinthians Chapter 13 (written about the virtues of love) as important to her forgiveness journey. Yet another participant discussed stories of the prophet Muhammad in the Quran and stated that reading these stories allowed her to understand the importance of forgiveness and therefore "inspired" her to continue working towards forgiveness.

The above themes, coupled with the theme of "Spiritual good/growth arising from an offense" were the most commonly referenced religious strategies utilized to forgive. It is

important to emphasize that themes not based in Christianity were also discussed as instrumental in the forgiveness process. Namely, two Jewish participants discussed the importance of the Day of Atonement (or Yom Kippur) in their forgiveness journey. The Day of Atonement emphasizes forgiving others for transgressions they have committed and seeking forgiveness for your own sins. One Jewish participant stated that the strong emphasis on forgiveness during Yom Kippur helped her reflect on her own offenses and, in turn, those she may need to forgive.

Secular Elements of Forgiveness

In addition to explicitly religious motivations to forgive and strategies utilized to reach forgiveness, participants also discussed a number of factors influencing their ability to forgive that were not religious in nature. As stated, all participants discussed *both* religious and secular factors that motivated them to forgive or enabled them to forgive.

Secular Motivations to Forgive. Although religious motivations to forgive were endorsed and discussed, secular motivations were described with more than double the frequency (religious motivations were endorsed 16 times, whereas secular motivations were endorsed 39 times). The most commonly discussed secular motivations to forgive included the following: “Forgive to be forgiven by others” (endorsed by 8 participants), “Achieve peace” (6), “Decrease bitterness” (6), and lastly, “Forgive for my community and society as a whole” (5). These elements were each considered secular motivations, and not religious motivations, for a few key reasons. First, participants described the above motivations in secular, not religious, terms. While participants directly described their faith, religious commitment, and/or religious affiliation when discussing religious themes, the above themes were described by participants without the use of religious terms or references. Second, in

contrast to religious themes (which must include religious elements to be considered religious), the secular themes listed above were applied and implemented by participants without the necessity of a religious foundation. For example, participants described the importance of forgiving for the betterment of society without discussing religious elements.

"Forgive to be forgiven by others" was discussed by the majority of participants as a factor that motivated them to forgive their offender. Participants endorsing this theme believed that in order to receive forgiveness themselves (either in the past or future) it is necessary to extend forgiveness to others. One participant described this belief by stating that it is important to "forgive others faults, (so) your faults will be forgiven too". On a related note, some participants described their own need for forgiveness from others in the past and stated that because they have required forgiveness from others, they are inspired to forgive as well. One participant simply stated, "Others have forgiven me" when describing her motivation to forgive her offender. In addition, for some participants this theme encompasses not only the hope that if you grant others forgiveness, they will forgive you as well, but also deep gratitude for forgiveness received in the past.

Participants also described additional factors and beliefs that motivated them to forgive. Six participants stated that they were motivated to forgive their offender to "achieve peace" in their own lives. Participants described a number of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors they experienced in reaction to an endured offense. One participant described that the "room was spinning" when his offender hurt him. Another participant stated her offense was "devastating" and led her to feel angry and betrayed. Likewise, participants described questioning why their offender hurt them and wondering how such pain could have been inflicted on them. After experiencing such difficult emotions and spending months and often

years questioning why a hurt transpired, many participants stated that they were motivated to forgive to obtain peace in their lives. The notion of peace included a few different elements for participants. For example, one participant stated that she forgave to not only gain peace, but to “reduce grudges”. Other participants described their desire for peace as wanting to be “happy” and “content” in their lives. Participants strongly endorsed the belief that by forgiving, they would be able to move forward from an offense and feel a sense of peacefulness (which one participant described as “inner peace”) when thinking about the hurt they experienced. When questioned if they were able to find peace by forgiving, a number of participants confirmed feeling a stronger sense of peace by choosing to forgive. One participant described peace as an “outgrowth” and “effect” of forgiveness.

In addition, 6 participants cited the motivation to “decrease bitterness” as a reason they forgave their offender. A number of participants stated they felt angry, bitter, and upset towards their offender and were, quite simply, tired of having such negative feelings as a part of their lives. A desire to decrease bitterness towards not only their offender, but others as well, was frequently described as a motivation to forgive. One participant stated that she sought forgiveness because she feared her feelings of bitterness towards her offender would continue to grow and would eventually control her. Forgiveness, she stated, was not only an opportunity to regain control, but also an important chance to minimize bitterness. Another participant described a similar reaction, stating that she was motivated to forgive so the offense would not “consume me with bitterness and anger”. In addition, participants clearly viewed bitterness as something that was detrimental to not only their relationships with others, but also to their psychological health. One participant discussed the connection between his emotional health and bitter feelings by stating he believes holding a grudge is

not healthy and in turn leads to bitterness. He reported that when one is bitter it is “hard to be connected” with others. Another participant stated she believed her strong feelings of bitterness were actually “limiting me” and ultimately, hurting herself. Participants consistently described bitterness as a negative outgrowth of their offense, which they were highly motivated to reduce and eliminate.

Finally, participants also described motivations to forgive for the betterment of their community and society as a whole. This theme emerged across participant interviews and was consistently described as a strong motivation to offer forgiveness. Participants did not see an offense as transpiring between only themselves and their offender, but instead, believed the ramifications of an offense had the potential to harm one’s community as a whole. Participants viewed forgiveness as a path through which they could help foster goodwill, care, and love in society. Although participants stated they were motivated to forgive to better their communities, participants differed in exactly how they felt forgiveness would improve society. For example, one participant stated that we should forgive others because the act of forgiveness can “repair the world”. Likewise, one participant stated she feels that part of living in a “good community” is the willingness to “overlook faults from time to time”. Other participants shared this belief, stating, for example, that forgiveness should be offered to others because it promotes “friendly relationships” and has the potential to lead to a “more close and happy society”. Overall, participants commonly expressed the belief that the act of forgiving can help better communities, and perhaps, society as a whole.

Secular Strategies Used to Forgive. In addition to factors motivating forgiveness, participants also discussed a number of strategies and methods they utilized to reach forgiveness. As stated, all participants mentioned implementing religious and secular

elements to help them forgive; however, secular strategies used to forgive were mentioned with more frequency than religious strategies (religious strategies were discussed 34 times, as opposed to secular strategies which were discussed 39 times).

One important pattern that was evident across participant interviews was the strong presence of cognitive reframing and restructuring involved in overcoming an offense (cognitive reframing occurs when people replace irrational or faulty thoughts and beliefs with more healthy, rational, and realistic thought patterns). The most frequently cited strategies ("Good/growth arising from an offense" and "Developing empathy towards my offender") both involve a significant amount of cognitive reframing. Individuals discussed the process of actively changing their thoughts and beliefs about the offense they experienced. For example, instead of viewing an offense as a horrific event, an offense was reframed to become a difficult experience that led to tremendous growth as a person. Likewise, participants reframed their beliefs about the offender. Participants expressed initial anger, confusion, and great sadness towards their offender after a hurt transpired. However, individuals commonly developed empathy towards their offender. For example, an offense that was initially viewed as the result of a cruel person was reframed to become an offense resulting from untreated alcoholism. Thus, forgiveness was not something one stumbled across, but was a process involving a great deal of deliberate perspective taking and cognitive effort.

As stated previously (see *Religious Strategies Used to Forgive*), one of the most common strategies participants used to forgive was identifying some type of good/growth arising from the offense. This theme was discussed by nearly all participants (9 of 10) and was expressed as both a religious and secular theme. Participants (7) described personal

growth and development as a positive effect of their offense. Many participants stated that the offense they experienced shaped who they are today and made them a “different and better” person. One participant stated that the hurt she endured (involving her parents) allowed her to think critically about parenting and therefore potentially become a better parent to her own children. Another participant stated, “there is nothing of this experience (the hurt) wasted because I learned so much”. An additional participant stated that the hurt allowed her to “learn to express how I feel”. Although the type of positive experience that arose from offenses varied, almost every participant demonstrated a tremendous ability to seek good and growth out of what were often horrific offenses. Besides the theme of “Personal good/growth arising from the offense”, the most common secular themes discussed by participants include: “Developing empathy towards my offender” (discussed by 8 participants), “Focusing on positive qualities of my offender” (8), and lastly, “Spending time alone” (5).

The forgiveness strategy of “Developing empathy towards my offender” was a significant theme mentioned by nearly all participants as a key element of the forgiveness process. Interestingly, empathy was frequently one of the first themes participants mentioned during the interviews and seemed to be an absolutely essential element, without which forgiveness may prove to be much more difficult to obtain. Participants described empathy in various ways. Some individuals merely stated that they understood why their offender hurt them whereas other participants discussed in-depth reasons, rationale, and motivations behind their offender’s behavior. Many participants described the process of developing empathy as occurring over a long period of time during which they reflected upon the offense and were able to gain “understanding” about their offender. One participant, who

experienced severe abuse as a child, stated that she gained an awareness of what life may have been like for her offender. She stated that “life was really hard for him” and that she was able to eventually understand the offender as an alcoholic with a “disease”. Understanding an offender’s potential thoughts and feelings proved to be an essential part of developing empathy. For example, one participant stated that she thought a great deal about her offender and could “understand why they did what they did” and could “understand now what made him (the offender) the way he was”. Similarly, another participant stated that she began to “understand what he was thinking” and was able to “decide what was going on from his point of view”. Yet another individual discussed characteristics of her offender that she believed may have caused him to hurt her; specifically, that “he had…a very poor self image” and his behavior may have been “part of his generation”. One participant stated that once she was able to understand her offender and the potential reasons behind his behavior, she began to “feel sorry for him”.

Second, eight participants discussed seeing “Positive qualities” of their offender as an important element which enabled them to forgive. It is important to clarify that although developing empathy and identifying positive qualities of the offender are similar concepts, a distinction was made between them. Whereas empathy referred to a participant’s understanding of why their offender may have hurt them, identifying positive qualities of the offender referred to a participant’s overall view of their offender as a generally good and positive person. For example, participants describing empathy as a part of forgiveness worked to discover potential reasons why their offender hurt them and individual circumstances surrounding the hurt (e.g. the offender was an “alcoholic” which may have led him to commit the offense). In contrast, participants who were able to see good qualities of

their offender described positive characteristics not relating directly to the hurt (e.g. the offender was a good father motivating the victim to offer forgiveness). During the interviews, many participants discussed positive characteristics of their offenders and even expressed love and affection towards them. The ability to see an offender as not merely the perpetrator of the offense, but as a complex person with positive qualities, appears to be an important step in promoting forgiveness. One participant, who had experienced marital hurts, stated that although her husband had offended her greatly, she recognized that he was a good father ("he…gave my children a father's love") and was "friendly with people". Although she experienced a significant offense, she was able to also recognize the positive aspects of her offender. Likewise, another participant stated that she found "terrific" qualities in the person that offended her and reported that forgiveness was important to her because she was motivated to continue her relationship with the offender in order to "benefit from her good qualities". An additional participant expressed similar feelings, stating that they considered the offender a "brilliant man" who "loves us (his family)". Examining the positive qualities of one's offender seemed to be an important step towards forgiveness. This type of cognitive reframing allowed participants to view their offender as not just the person who hurt them, but as a person with both negative and positive characteristics. As one participant aptly stated, "the abuse was just one small part of our relationship".

Third and finally, a number of participants discussed the importance of "Spending time alone" as a strategy they used to forgive their offender. Participants frequently stated that by spending time alone they were able to think about and reflect on the offense they endured. For some participants, time alone seemed to put the offense into perspective. One participant described time alone as the opportunity for her to "separate myself (from the

situation) to sort things out". However, not just "time alone", but time in general seemed to be an important theme in the forgiveness process. Although only half of participants explicitly mentioned "time alone" as an element of extending forgiveness to their offender, other participants discussed the passage of time itself as critical to offering forgiveness. One participant expressed that "time heals all wounds", and likewise, another participant stated that as time passed she gained "emotional maturity" and was eventually able to forgive. In addition, a few participants stated that time away from the offender gave them the space necessary to address their negative feelings associated with the offense and begin to forgive.

Religious and Secular Unique or Uncommon Strategies Used to Forgive. Lastly, although the present study focuses most heavily on forgiveness themes mentioned by a number of participants, it is interesting to note that a few participants mentioned utilizing forgiveness strategies they developed and implemented themselves. For example, an imaginative participant stated that she engaged in "artistic expression" in the form of artwork and yoga to help her forgive. Another participant stated she had a small memorial service to solidify her commitment to forgive. She invited a few close friends, read aloud meaningful passages, and released balloons to symbolize forgiveness towards herself and her offender. Still another participant stated that she attended a religious retreat which included participating in a simple, monastic routine. She stated that prayer and the opportunity to reflect on the offense were instrumental in promoting forgiveness for her offender. Furthermore, she reported that during the retreat the experience of being anointed with oil by a religious leader was the moment in which she embraced forgiveness. In summary, participants did not describe a finite way to forgive. Although individuals reported many

common motivations and strategies, all participants reached forgiveness through a path that was uniquely their own.

CHAPTER 7

RESULTS: STUDY 2

Preliminary Analyses

Missing data. Before statistical analyses began, data was analyzed to ensure any missing data was purely due to random factors**.** A total of 298 individuals (who participated in three separate studies) were included in the data set (Study 1, n = 149; Study 2, n = 35; Study 3, n = 114). Of the 298 participants who completed pre-test measures, data is missing from three participants on the TRIM Revenge subscale (completed by 295 of 298 participants; 99% completion rate) and from 5 participants on the TRIM Avoidance subscale (293 of 298; 98% completion rate). Furthermore, three participants (295 of 298; 99% completion rate) have missing data on Batson's Empathy Adjectives. In addition, eight participants (290 of 298; 97% completion rate) have missing data on the Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI). While all three studies in the data set used the RCI, the TRIM, and Batson's Empathy Adjectives, only Study 2 and Study 3 used the Global Symptom Inventory (GSI). Of the studies that did include the GSI, data is missing from 23 participants (126 of 149; 85% completion rate) at time 1. Likewise, only Study 1 and Study 3 included the Trait Forgivingness Scale, which is missing data from 26 participants (237 of 263; 90% completion rate). Furthermore, missing data was also analyzed at time 2. (For attrition rates prior to starting the intervention, see the original studies: Wade, 2002; Wade & Meyer, 2009; Wade, Meyer, Goldman, & Post 2008). Data for missing values in participant responses were imputed only if less than 10% of data was missing from a particular scale. If this criterion was met, data was imputed based on participants' responses on the other items of that particular scale. Data is missing from 50 participants on the TRIM Revenge subscale, the

TRIM Avoidance subscale, and Batson's Empathy Adjectives at time 2 (248 of 298; 83% completion rate). However, on the GSI, which was utilized in Study 1 and Study 2, there was more missing data (60 participants) than other measures in the present study (89 of 149; 60% completion rate). Some of the missing data on the GSI is due to client attrition, yet the remainder of it can likely be attributed to clients who did not complete post-test measures even though they finished the study. For additional information on the data imputation processes, please refer to the original studies (Wade, 2002; Wade & Meyer, 2009; Wade, Meyer, Goldman, & Post 2008).

Pre-treatment group comparisons. In order to ensure that participant data was equivalent in the outcome variables of interest at time 1 (pre-treatment), four one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted. Each ANOVA contained one dependent variable of interest (revenge, avoidance, empathy, or psychological symptoms) measured prior to treatment. The independent variable was treatment condition. The first independent variable, treatment condition, was developed to effectively compare any differences that may exist between participants who had experienced some type of treatment (forgiveness or alternate treatment conditions) and participants who were in the wait-list condition and received no treatment. Therefore, participants in the forgiveness or alternate conditions were classified as receiving a treatment, whereas persons on the wait-list were classified as receiving no treatment. All four ANOVAs demonstrated that there was no main effect for treatment, indicating that at time 1 participants were equivalent on measures of forgiveness and psychological symptoms. Also prior to the main analyses, descriptive statistics were computed for the outcome variables across religious commitment, treatment condition, and time (see Table 4). Lastly, all data sets independently explored potential facilitator

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Outcome Variables by Religious Commitment, Treatment Condition, and Time

Outcome	Condition	Religious Commitment			
		Low/Moderate		High	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Revenge	Treatment	10.91 (5.16)	8.87 (4.19)	9.60 (5.26)	7.49 (3.54)
	No Treatment	11.74 (4.78)	10.04 (4.16)	7.60 (4.60)	8.67 (5.57)
Avoidance	Treatment	24.87 (8.25)	22.18 (8.13)	21.49 (8.19)	18.65 (8.28)
	No Treatment	24.98 (7.08)	24.11 (7.54)	22.10 (8.76)	23.83 (7.94)
Empathy	Treatment	16.57 (8.48)	17.81 (8.82)	22.06 (9.80)	23.28 (10.54)
	No Treatment	18.42 (9.38)	15.33 (8.41)	19.70 (10.51)	19.83 (11.58)
Psychological Symptoms	Treatment	.80 (.63)	.57 (.53)	.71 (.49)	.40 (.27)
	No Treatment	.88 (.67)	.77 (.47)	.81 (.62)	.57 (.32)

Note. Standard deviations shown in parentheses.

effects and did not find any significant differences in the relevant outcomes measures among the facilitators (for additional information see the original studies: Wade, 2002; Wade & Meyer, 2009; Wade, Meyer, Goldman, & Post 2008).

Main Analyses

The primary aim of the present study was to test the hypothesis proposed by Worthington (1988) stating that persons of high religious commitment (one standard deviation above the mean on measures of religious commitment) will forgive more than those of low to moderate religious commitment. Dependent variables for the main analyses were the forgiveness-related variables of revenge, avoidance, and empathy towards an offender, as well as psychological symptoms. Independent variables were treatment condition and religious commitment.

Religious commitment and forgiveness. In order to determine if differences in forgiveness outcomes existed between participants of moderate/low versus high religious commitment and between treatment and no treatment conditions, a 2 (religious commitment) x 2 (treatment condition) x 2 (time) mixed multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The dependent variables of interest were forgiveness-related outcomes (i.e., desires for revenge and avoidance, and empathy for the offender at pre and post treatment). The independent variables were treatment and religious commitment. The results of the MANOVA indicated that there was not a significant multivariate interaction effect of religious commitment and time, *Wilks's* λ = .98, F (3, 229) = 1.34, p = .26, of treatment condition and time, *Wilks's* λ = .97, F (3, 229) = 2.20, p = .09, or the three-way interaction between religious commitment, treatment condition, and time, *Wilks's* λ = .98, F (3, 229) = 1.60, p = .19 (see Table 5). This indicates that there was no difference in the change in

Table 5

Multivariate Analysis of Variance, F Values, and Significance Levels for Forgiveness-Related Outcomes and Psychological Symptoms

Dependent Variables	Effect	*Wilks's λ*	*F*	*p*	*df*
Forgiveness					
	RCI x Time	.98	1.34	.26	(3, 229)
	Treatment x Time	.97	2.20	.09	(3, 229)
	RCI x Treatment x Time	.98	1.60	.19	(3, 229)
Psychological Symptoms					
	RCI x Time	.98	1.80	.19	(1, 69)
	Treatment x Time	.99	.54	.46	(1, 69)
	RCI x Treatment x Time	1.0	.17	.68	(1, 69)

Note. Religious Commitment was measured using the Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI). Psychological Symptoms were measured using the Global Symptom Inventory (GSI) subscale of the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI).

forgiveness-related outcomes for people of high versus moderate to low religious commitment, for people receiving treatment or not, or the interaction between religious commitment and treatment.

Religious commitment and psychological distress. In order to determine if a relationship exists between religious commitment and psychological distress over time (from pre to post treatment) based on treatment, a 2 (religious commitment) x 2 (treatment condition) x 2 (time) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with psychological distress as the dependent variable. The results of the ANOVA indicated that there was not a significant interaction effect of religious commitment and time, *Wilks's* λ = .98, F (1, 69) = 1.79, p = .19, of treatment condition and time, *Wilks's* λ = .99, F (1, 69) = .54, p = .46, or the three-way interaction between religious commitment, treatment condition, and time, *Wilks's* λ = 1.00, F (1, 69) = .17, p = .68. This indicates that there was no difference in the change in psychological symptoms for people of high versus moderate to low religious commitment, for people receiving treatment or not, or the interaction between religious commitment and treatment.

Trait forgivingness as a mediator. The final aim of the present study was to explore the role of trait forgivingness as a possible mediator of religious commitment and forgiveness-related outcomes (revenge, avoidance, and empathy). In order to examine trait forgivingness as a mediator, mediation tests as outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) were utilized. First, Baron and Kenny suggest that researchers should establish that the independent variable (religious commitment) is related to the outcome variable (forgiveness). In order to ascertain that this condition was met, multiple regression analyses of forgiveness-related variables at both pre and post treatment were conducted. Analyses demonstrated that

religious commitment significantly predicted revenge at time 1 (R^2 = .01, F = 4.94, p = .02), empathy at time 1 (pre treatment; R^2 = .01, F = 6.20, p = .01) and empathy at time 2 (post treatment; R^2 = .03, F = 9.33, p < .000). Second, Baron and Kenny recommend conducting analyses to determine that the predictor variable (religious commitment) is related to the possible mediating variable (trait forgivingness). Therefore, the relationship between religious commitment and trait forgivingness was tested using multiple regression. Results demonstrated that religious commitment significantly predicted trait forgivingness (R^2 = 0.09, F = 25.14, p < .000).

Third and finally, Baron and Kenny recommend analyzing the relationship between the potential mediating variable (trait forgivingness) and the dependent variables (forgiveness-related outcomes) when controlling for the initial predictor variable (religious commitment). This was done using path analyses in order to determine if trait forgivingness mediates forgiveness-related variables (specifically, revenge at time 1, empathy at time 1, and empathy at time 2). Furthermore, a bootstrap procedure was utilized to estimate both direct and indirect effects. Because the traditionally used Sobel test has been critiqued for being overly conservative (MacKinnon, Warsi, & Dwyer, 1995), the bootstrap procedure was implemented instead. Results indicated that trait forgivingness fully mediates the relationship between religious commitment and revenge at time 1 (β = -.11, B = -.05 SE = .01, $p \leq .001$). In contrast, results indicated that trait forgivingness did not mediate the relationship between religious commitment and empathy at time 1 or time 2 (see Table 6). Overall, trait forgivingness fully mediated the relationship between religious commitment and revenge, but not the relationship between religious commitment and empathy.

Table 6

Bootstrap Analyses of the Indirect Effects of Religious Commitment on Forgiveness-Related Outcome Variables

Predictor Variable	Mediator Variable	Outcome Variable	(*β*) Standardized Indirect Effect	(*B*) Mean Indirect Effect	*SE* of Mean Indirect Effect	95% Confidence Interval Mean Indirect Effect (Lower, Upper)
RC→	Trait Forgivingness→	Revenge Time 1	-.11*	-.05	.01	-.08, -.03
RC→	Trait Forgivingness→	Empathy Time 1	.01	.01	.02	-.02, .06
RC→	Trait Forgivingness→	Empathy Time 2	.02	.02	.02	-.02, .07

Note. RC = Religious Commitment
* $p \leq .001$

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to explore the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness by examining the forgiveness-related variables of revenge, avoidance, empathy, and trait forgivingness. Study 1, which was qualitative in nature, examined the process of forgiveness for highly religious persons, and specifically, factors that motivate one to forgive and strategies utilized to achieve forgiveness. Results from Study 1 indicated that although participants often forgive in a way that is uniquely theirs (by picking and choosing methods they feel will enable them to reach forgiveness), participants implemented many similar strategies to reach forgiveness. Study 2 quantitatively examined the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness after participants completed a forgiveness intervention or alternative treatment condition. Although some prior research has found that religious commitment appears to be related to forgiveness (Edwards et al., 2002; Exline et al., 2004), results of the present study did not find that religious commitment is associated with forgiveness. In addition, the present results suggest that religious commitment may not be related to improvement in psychological distress from pre to post treatment. Lastly, the current study explored trait forgivingness as a potential mediator of the relationship between religious commitment and the forgiveness-related variables of revenge, avoidance, and empathy. Results supported the hypothesis that trait forgivingness would fully mediate the relationship between religious commitment and revenge at pre treatment (time 1). However, results indicate that trait forgivingness does not mediate the relationship between religious commitment and avoidance or empathy.

Study 1: Synthesis of Findings

Study 1 explored the process of forgiveness for religious persons by examining factors that motivate forgiveness and strategies utilized to obtain forgiveness. Despite different religious backgrounds and great variations in offense severity, participants in the current study used many similar strategies in an effort to forgive offenses committed against them. Although participants were highly religious, they reported using both religious and secular elements throughout the forgiveness process. To the author's knowledge, this is the first study to qualitatively examine motivations and strategies religious persons utilize to forgive an offender. However, many themes and patterns discovered in the present study are in accordance with prior quantitative forgiveness research.

Results of Study 1 suggest that there is a great deal of similarity in forgiveness strategies utilized by participants in the present study and forgiveness strategies promoted in commonly used group forgiveness interventions. Worthington's (1998) Model to REACH Forgiveness is a well-researched and frequently used group forgiveness intervention model designed to help participants obtain forgiveness after an offense (Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). Prior research has confirmed that Worthington's Model effectively promotes forgiveness (Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005; Worthington, 1998). After reviewing participant data from Study 1, it is clear that there are significant similarities between forgiveness motivations and strategies utilized by participants in the present study and corresponding elements of Worthington's well-established REACH model.

First, Worthington's REACH model proposes that the development of empathy towards an offender is a vital part of the forgiveness process (Worthington, 1998). Likewise, additional researchers have suggested that empathy is an important first step in the process of

forgiveness, and specifically that in order to forgive an offense, persons often need to gain an understanding of why their offender may have hurt them (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Likewise, the majority of participants in the present study stated that developing empathy towards their offender was an important strategy they utilized to obtain forgiveness. Participants were consistently adamant that understanding possible reasons why their offender committed an offense against them was an important way to facilitate forgiveness and allow them to move beyond the hurt. Ultimately, the process of empathizing helped participants to view their offender in a more positive and realistic light and therefore, enabled participants to begin to forgive. Also of note is that participants in the present study often discussed the development of empathy as one of the first elements they utilized in their forgiveness journey.

In addition to the importance of empathy in the forgiveness process, a second element from Worthington's (1998) REACH model was frequently discussed by participants in Study 1. Worthington proposes that developing a sense of altruism towards an offender is a key part of forgiveness and that in order to forgive an offender, persons often must understand that nearly everyone will commit an offense against another person which requires forgiveness. Since everyone is likely to need forgiveness, Worthington suggests persons can benefit by giving the "gift" of forgiveness to one another. Many participants discussed a view similar to Worthington's view of altruism, stating that they were motivated to forgive their offender because they have committed offenses themselves which have warranted forgiveness, and specifically, they wanted to forgive their offender to be forgiven by others in return. In addition, some participants professed a religious motivation to forgive, stating that they were motivated to forgive because they believe God forgives each person for their sinfulness.

Participants routinely described the importance of offering forgiveness to others in order to be forgiven themselves. Ultimately, the belief that everyone will be in need of forgiveness at some point and therefore persons should forgive one another was a commonly described theme.

A third and especially important theme discussed in both prior research and found in the current study is the emphasis on time as a central element of forgiveness. Time represents different things to each participant and can be vital for a number of reasons. In the present study, half of the participants stated that spending time alone, reflecting on the offense, thinking about their offender, and/or simply giving themselves time away from the offender, was a crucial step in the forgiveness process. A few participants also explicitly stated that they viewed the simple passage of time itself as imperative to their ability to forgive. Perhaps most importantly, participants in the present study used time after the offense occurred to come to terms with what happened to them and to process painful emotions associated with the offense. Likewise, many researchers have emphasized the tremendous importance of reflecting upon and recalling painful emotions associated with a hurt after an offense transpires. Wade and Worthington (2005) suggest that participants often require adequate time to recall a hurt and process emotions resulting from an offense before forgiveness can truly occur. In related research, McCullough, Bono, and Root (2007) explored the relationship between rumination and forgiveness. They suggest that rumination after an offense has transpired (that is, mentally re-experiencing the negative emotions associated with an offense) can hinder one's ability to forgive. Instead, they found that individuals who focused on decreasing ruminative thoughts, instead of entertaining them, showed significantly more forgiveness. This research suggests that although time after an offense is

often necessary, the way in which persons use time to move towards forgiveness (for example, by cognitively reframing their offense), instead of simply ruminating on negative emotions, may be more important. Therefore, research indicates that often persons cannot hastily forgive, but must take time to reflect on the offense and process negative emotions associated with the offense. Overall, research seems to support the age-old adage that time heals wounds.

Lastly, the present study also identified one especially unique theme which, in contrast with the themes of empathy, altruism, and the passage of time, has not been consistently researched in the forgiveness literature. All but one participant in Study 1 discussed positive aspects or outgrowths of the hurt they endured (five participants discussed spiritual good/growth as a result of the hurt, seven participants discussed secular good/growth, and three participants described both spiritual and secular good/growth after the offense). Participants did not view their hurt as merely a terrible event they endured, but instead, believed that good and/or personal growth developed as a direct result of their hurt. Participants were adamant that they would not be who they are today, and likewise, would not be in their present life circumstances if the offense had not transpired. Many participants cited the offense as an event that led them to develop and grow as a person, both spiritually and psychologically. Although there is little to no research examining good or growth that individuals report specifically related to forgiveness, there is a wealth of relevant research on the related field of posttraumatic growth. Posttraumatic growth has been defined as the multitude of positive outcomes (such as a deeper appreciation for life, the development of personal strength, finding new possibilities in life, or spiritual development) individuals often report after a traumatic event (Peterson et al., 2008; Taku, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi,

2008). Research on posttraumatic growth supports the present finding that many people are able to identify positive elements of their life or experience personal growth as a direct result of a negative experience. For example, Peterson et al. (2008) researched persons who had experienced a variety of traumas (such as accidents and sexual assault) and found that persons frequently report an increase in character strengths (for example, gratitude for what they have or improved interpersonal relationships) after a trauma. In related research, Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Cann (2006) examined the relationship between intimate partner violence and posttraumatic growth. Cobb and colleagues reported that despite experiencing often severe physical and non-physical abuse, women frequently reported posttraumatic growth, and specifically an increased appreciation for life, due to the hurt they endured. Although research on posttraumatic growth does not directly explore the process of identifying good and growth after forgiving an offender, it strongly suggests that growth is possible after a trauma. While enduring an interpersonal hurt is painful and the process of forgiving is often difficult, many people are able to experience significant growth after an offense. In accordance with the above findings, nearly all participants in Study 1 emphasized that they were able to identify good/growth that developed as a result of the hurt they experienced. Because this theme was so consistently and enthusiastically endorsed by participants in the present study, it is a potentially important element of forgiveness that forgiveness researchers should seek to explore in greater depth in the future.

Study 1: Limitations and Future Research Questions

While Study 1 sheds light on important factors that motivate religious persons to forgive and strategies utilized to forgive, there are limitations to this research. One potential limitation in the current study is the small sample size. While qualitative approaches seek to

obtain an in-depth view of an individual's experience, a larger sample size in the present study would have potentially strengthened the current results. When possible, researchers exploring forgiveness in the future, in both qualitative and quantitative research designs, should attempt to examine patterns of forgiveness using large samples of participants.

A second and related drawback to the present findings is the lack of participants from a wide variety of religions. Although the present study included participants from Buddhist, Christian, Islam, and Jewish backgrounds, the majority of participants were Christian. While efforts were made to recruit a diverse sample, it was difficult to gather participant data from various religious backgrounds. Because the majority of participants were Christian, the results of this study tend to focus most heavily on traditionally Judeo-Christian values and beliefs. Most research to date has examined the relationship between Christianity and forgiveness, and therefore has not adequately explored the influence of Eastern religions on the forgiveness process. To truly understand the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness, researchers should make every effort to examine the relationship between a wide variety of religious traditions and forgiveness. In addition, researchers should strive to make distinctions between affiliations within a religious tradition when studying the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness. Many religious affiliations (particularly within Christianity) profess varied beliefs and teachings on forgiveness, and therefore, religious affiliation is likely to be an influential factor in one's ability and desire to forgive (Tsang et al., 2006).

A third limitation of Study 1 is the potential ambiguity of the categorization system utilized. Throughout this study, consistent efforts were made to thoroughly review and identify themes from participant data as either "secular" or "religious". Careful consideration

was given to how participant data would be described and categorized, and specifically, what distinguishes religious themes from secular themes. In addition, reliability checks were implemented to help ensure accuracy. Although efforts were made to appropriately classify each theme, it is possible that the themes presented in Study 1 may unintentionally overlap and that religious influences may be present in secular themes. In particular, for some highly religious individuals, elements of their faith and belief system may be present in all areas of their life, making it difficult for them to truly separate "religious" and "secular" components of forgiveness. Although participants may describe an element in strictly secular terms, it is difficult to ascertain that religious influences were not present in secular elements of forgiveness. Prior research has suggested that even when presented with a secular approach to forgiveness, persons may independently draw on their religious beliefs to help them forgive (Rye and Paragament, 2002). Therefore, although elements of forgiveness appear to be secular in nature, participants might, whether deliberately or not, enhance secular forgiveness strategies with religious themes, values, and ideas. The present study raises many questions about what factors religious persons use to forgive and if it is ever feasible to definitively sort, classify, and categorize secular and religious themes present within the forgiveness process. Future research should explore the precise mechanisms religious individuals utilize to forgive, and specifically, the possible intersect between religious and secular elements of forgiveness.

A fourth and final limitation of Study 1 is the potential role of social desirability and self-selection. Study 1 recruited persons from a rather large potential participant pool (approximately 5 religious organizations and congregations); however, only 10 participants completed the study, including the interview and pre and post test measures. The relatively

low response rate of potential participants may indicate that perhaps for every highly religious participant who contacted the researcher and was able to use their religious faith to forgive, other religious participants did not utilize their faith to forgive or were simply not able to reach a place of forgiveness. Therefore, the experience of using one's religious beliefs to forgive may be a challenging process that not all religious persons are able to effectively complete. It is possible that participants in the present study, who were able to use their faith to aid in the forgiveness process, represented the minority of religious persons who reach forgiveness by utilizing their faith, rather than the majority of persons who may not forgive.

Study 2: Religious Commitment and Forgiveness Discrepancy

The primary purpose of Study 2 was to test Worthington's (1988) theory proposing that persons at or above one standard deviation above the mean on religious commitment measures will exhibit significantly more forgiveness than non-religious or moderately religious persons. To examine this theory, Study 2 explored the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness after individuals participated in a forgiveness intervention condition or alternative treatment condition. Results from Study 2 found that religious commitment was not significantly related to forgiveness. While support for Worthington's hypothesis was not found in the present study, there are a few possible explanations for the discrepancy between previous research concluding religious commitment and forgiveness are related and the results of Study 2.

A first potential explanation for the current findings concerns the methodology of past research exploring the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness. As stated, research conducted by Edwards et al. (2002) and Exline et al. (2004) has indicated that highly religious participants report being highly forgiving. However, this research was

correlational in nature, and therefore, did not allowed researchers to examine if highly religious individuals are actually more forgiving than non-religious persons when responding to real-life experienced offenses or if highly religious persons merely indicate they are forgiving on self-report measures. Because the present study examined forgiveness after a real-life offense and did not find a significant relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness, it is possible that whereas religious persons report being highly forgiving, they are not necessarily more forgiving than non-religious persons when faced with an actual offense.

In similar research, McCullough and Worthington (1999) have suggested that perhaps religious individuals report that they are highly forgiving, but in actuality, a link between situation-specific forgiveness and religious commitment may not exist. McCullough and Worthington explain this discrepancy by stating, "religious people appear convinced that they should be forgiving people; however, at the level of individual offenses, religious involvement seems to play at best a small role" (pg. 1151). Furthermore, McCullough and Worthington state that although religious people feel they should be forgiving and in fact, may wish to be forgiving, they appear to be no better equipped to offer forgiveness than non-religious individuals. In addition, they suggest that while religious commitment seems to influence forgiveness at a "general, abstract level", it may not affect one's ability to forgive an actual offense (pg. 1146). Ultimately, while a person may view themselves as highly forgiving and state that they value forgiveness; self-report findings do not seem to directly translate to increased forgiveness after a real life offense. The results of the current study appear to demonstrate, consistent with McCullough and Worthington's findings, that

although religious persons report forgiveness in correlational studies, they do not necessarily forgive real life offenses with greater propensity than non-religious individuals.

A second possible explanation for the present findings may be that spirituality, instead of religiosity, is more directly involved in the forgiveness process. While results from the present study did not find a connection between religious commitment and forgiveness, it may be that forgiveness is more directly influenced by spirituality. Spirituality has been described as a "personal expression of ultimate concern" and an individual's "response to the deepest truths of the universe" (Emmons, 2000; pg. 4; Bregman & Thierman, 1995; pg. 149). Likewise, spirituality has been defined as "concern that shapes and gives direction to a person's ultimate concerns in life" and "personal goals focused on the sacred" (Emmons, 2000; pg. 4). Researchers have suggested that spirituality is, in actuality, a distinct concept from religious commitment, yet may influence forgiveness. A number of studies have suggested that a significant relationship exists between spirituality and forgiveness. Koutsos et al. (2008) explored the relationship between personality, spirituality, and forgiveness. Interestingly, Koutsos et al. did not report finding a relationship between religiosity and forgiveness; however, they did find that religiosity is related to spirituality, which in turn is correlated with personality dispositions believed to lead persons to forgive more readily. Additional research has supported Koutsos et al.'s findings. Leach and Lark (2004), in a study of undergraduate students from a variety of religious traditions, explored the link between spirituality, personality, and forgiveness. Similar to Koutsos et al., Leach and Lark suggest that a relationship appears to exist between spirituality and self-forgiveness, such that individuals who are highly spiritual are more likely to forgive themselves. Therefore, it is possible that while a relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness was not

evident in the present findings, spirituality, instead of religious commitment, may be influential in the forgiveness process. Future research should explore distinctions between religious commitment and spirituality and the patterns of forgiveness in religious and spiritual persons.

Lastly, there is a final potential explanation for the present finding that religious commitment does not appear to influence one's ability and desire to forgive. Although research has found that religious commitment appears to be related to forgiveness (Edwards et al., 2002; Exline et al., 2004), some researchers have proposed that high religious commitment may actually inhibit the offering of forgiveness. Cohen et al. (2006) examined beliefs about forgiveness across religious traditions and suggested that some highly religious individuals may use their religious beliefs as a rationale for why they should *not* forgive an offender. Cohen et al. conducted three studies examining unforgivable offenses and found that Jewish participants were more likely to endorse the beliefs that some offenses are too severe to forgive, only the victim of an offense can offer forgiveness, and an offender must express repentance before forgiveness is granted. Therefore, although an individual may be highly religious, they may not necessarily be more able or willing to offer forgiveness than a non-religious individual. Instead, Cohen et al. propose that one's religious beliefs may only support offering forgiveness under specific circumstances.

Similar to the findings of Cohen et al. (2006), researchers have found that individuals may utilize their religious beliefs as a means through which they rationalize and accept unforgiveness. While the majority of world religions have doctrines that strongly profess the value of forgiveness, these same religions also have examples of retributive justice (the belief that certain actions are so terrible that it is one's moral duty to respond with punishment or

retribution) in their teachings. Many religious writings can be interpreted in a variety of contradictory ways, and therefore, some religious individuals may use their beliefs as justification for unforgiveness rather than a motivation to forgive. Tsang, McCullough and Hoyt (2005) propose that while persons may report being highly religious, they may not report forgiveness towards an offender. Tsang et al. suggest that this inconsistency may be due to a process called "moral justification" whereby persons "depict their unethical behavior as serving a valued social or moral purpose" (pg. 798). Therefore, individuals may use their religious beliefs as justification for the appropriateness of vengeful or retributive actions. For example, one may express unforgiveness because they believe the offender must experience retaliation as a punishment for their actions. As Tsang, McCullough and Hoyt explain, "vengeful individuals can characterize their revenge as serving 'God's justice'"; therefore, persons can cite their religious beliefs as a motivation for either forgiveness or unforgiveness (pg. 798). Likewise, some highly religious participants in the present study may have actually used their religious belief as a rationale for why they should not forgive their offender (for example, the offender committed an extremely severe offense or did not offer an apology). Therefore, while participants report being highly religious; the high religious commitment they profess may lead them to embrace retributive justice as opposed to forgiveness. It appears that high religious commitment in and of itself is not enough to lead to forgiveness. Instead, it may be that in order for persons to show an increased desire and ability to forgive, they must be committed to a religion that advocates forgiveness instead of retributive justice.

Study 2: Religious Commitment and Psychological Distress

The current study also explored the relationship between religious commitment and psychological distress, hypothesizing that persons of high religious commitment would

report greater reductions in psychological distress from pre to post treatment than persons of low to moderate religious commitment. Results of Study 2, however, did not support this hypothesis and instead found that regardless of reported religious commitment; participants were able to significantly decrease psychological distress.

The finding that psychological health improves after participation in a forgiveness or alternative treatment condition is well researched and thoroughly documented (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). Researchers have consistently demonstrated that forgiveness interventions lead to reductions in anxiety, depression, and hostility, as well as increases in hope and self-esteem (Hebel & Enright, 1993; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Knupp, 2003). Likewise, Lawler et al. (2005) demonstrated that forgiveness promotes positive psychological health by decreasing the anger associated with unforgiveness. Therefore, forgiveness interventions not only promote forgiveness, but enable participants to achieve better psychological health. The results of the present study certainly support past research indicating that persons benefit psychologically when they are able to forgive.

In addition to suggesting that forgiveness promotes positive psychological health, researchers have proposed that persons who are highly religious not only forgive more but may also have decreased psychological distress than non-religious individuals. Specifically, McCullough and Worthington (1999) suggest that religious beliefs may give persons a worldview which emphasizes not only forgiveness of others, but being forgiven by God. In this way, religion can lead to increased forgiveness, which in turn promotes positive psychological health through the reduction of depression, anxiety, and other negative psychological symptoms (McCullough & Worthington). Therefore, research has suggested

that because religiosity may influence forgiveness, religious individuals may potentially express increased abilities to forgive as well as the positive psychological health benefits that accompany forgiveness (Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006). This reasoning and research, however, does not necessarily apply to the present study in which both religious and non-religious persons were uniformly able to forgive offenders, and therefore, experienced positive psychological health as a result. If Study 2 had concluded that religious persons do express significantly more forgiveness than non-religious persons, it would likely also follow that they would report the greatest reductions in psychological distress due to their increased propensity to forgive. However, because both religious and non-religious individuals reported forgiveness towards offenders in the present study, participants also reported equal decreases in psychological distress.

Additional research may help further explain the reductions in psychological distress reported by participants in the present study regardless of their religious commitment. Research has proposed that religious commitment in general does not necessarily influence psychological distress, but that persons who ascribe to a certain type of religious orientation seem to gain psychological benefits. Specifically, Worthington et al. (1996) suggest that religion may promote psychological health in a variety of ways, such as giving persons hope, providing a social support system, and allowing individuals to obtain a strong sense of meaning in life. However, most importantly, Worthington and colleagues have suggested that persons with high intrinsic religiosity (that is, viewing religion as an “end in itself”, pg. 451) tend to experience better psychological health than extrinsically religious individuals (those who approach religion as a way to achieve specific ends). Therefore, the type of religious orientation individuals profess, either intrinsic or extrinsic, might significantly influence

psychological health. The present study did not measure different types of religious commitment or religiosity, but instead, utilized one instrument (the Religious Commitment Inventory) to capture religious commitment. Worthington et al.'s findings suggest that certain types of religiosity (specifically, intrinsic versus extrinsic) may influence psychological health differently. It is possible; therefore, that had the present study measured extrinsic or intrinsic religiosity instead of religious commitment, differences in psychological distress based on intrinsic versus extrinsic religiosity may have emerged. It may be beneficial for future research to explore potential differences in psychological distress based on specific types of religious commitment or religious orientations.

Study 2: Religious Commitment and Trait forgivingness

The final aim of study 2 was to explore trait forgivingness as a potential mediator between religious commitment and forgiveness. Results of the present study demonstrate that the relationship between religious commitment and specific forgiveness-related variables (specifically, revenge at time 1) is fully mediated by trait forgivingness. In contrast, findings also indicated that trait forgivingness does not mediate the relationship between religious commitment and avoidance or empathy.

In accordance with these findings, prior research has suggested that trait forgivingness appears to predict certain forgiveness-related variables (Berry et al., 2001; Berry et al., 2005). Specifically, Berry et al. (2005) found that trait forgivingness predicts revenge, such that persons with high trait forgivingness exhibit less revenge than persons with low trait forgivingness. In related findings, the present study concluded that trait forgivingness mediates the relationship between religious commitment and revenge. Also similar to the present study (which found that trait forgivingness does not mediate the

relationship between religious commitment and avoidance), Berry et al. concluded that while trait forgivingness is related to revenge, it does not seem to influence avoidance.

In related research, Berry et al. (2001) also examined trait forgivingness and concluded that trait forgivingness predicts situation specific forgiveness, and furthermore, that trait forgivingness is correlated with the forgiveness-related constructs of anger and hostility. The research conducted by Berry et al. also indicates that highly religious individuals report significantly more trait forgivingness than non-religious participants. This research is congruent with the findings of Study 2, indicating that religious commitment does not seem to be directly related to forgiveness, but instead, religious commitment may influence trait forgivingness, which is therefore related to situation specific forgiveness. Prior research coupled with the present findings demonstrates that trait forgivingness appears to mediate the relationship between religious commitment and certain forgiveness-related variables.

Study 2: Limitations and Future Research Questions

There are few limitations to the methodology and findings of the current study. First, participants in the present study reported affiliation with a wide range of religions. Researchers have suggested, however, that although many religious traditions value forgiveness, the precise beliefs regarding when, how, and by whom forgiveness should be granted may vary widely across religions (Tsang, McCullough & Hoyt, 2005; Wade et al., 2008). While forgiveness is the cornerstone of many religious faiths, not all religious traditions emphasize forgiveness to the same extent (McCullough & Worthington, 1999). The present study examined the influence of religious commitment on forgiveness, but did not account for the fact that forgiveness may be valued, encouraged, and supported in

different ways by each religion. Therefore, discrepancies in the extent to which religions emphasize forgiveness may have made it difficult to identify the precise influence of religious commitment on forgiveness. The present study might have been more effective if all participants were from the same religious tradition (for example, utilizing only Jewish participants), which would have allowed for a deeper exploration of how commitment to a specific religion influences forgiveness. Future researchers should consider that every religion advocates forgiveness to varying degrees, and furthermore, some religions propose that individuals offer forgiveness only under specific circumstances. The results of the present study clearly suggest that high religious commitment does not seem to directly equate to an increased tendency to forgive. Whereas a few researchers have pointed out that significantly different beliefs about forgiveness exist between religions (Tsang, McCullough & Hoyt, 2005), very little research has examined how different views of forgiveness between religious affiliations may influence forgiveness in response to an actual, experienced offense. Future research should further explore the precise relationships between religious affiliation, situation-specific forgiveness, and trait forgivingness.

A second potential drawback of the present study concerns the number of participants reporting high religious commitment. The primary aim of the current study was to empirically test Worthington's 1988 hypothesis that individuals scoring at or above one standard deviation above the mean on religious commitment inventories will report high religious commitment to the extent that they will be more likely to forgive. Of the 236 participants in the present study who fully completed the RCI, 52 of them reported religious commitment at or above one standard deviation above the mean (that is, an RCI score at or above 35). It is possible that religious commitment does in fact influence one's ability and

desire to forgive, but that the current study did not include enough highly religious individuals to yield these results. Had Study 2 included more highly religious individuals, the present findings may be somewhat different. Future research seeking to explore the influence of religious commitment on forgiveness should strive to recruit individuals that are highly religiously committed in order to best contrast differences in forgiveness between highly religious and non-religious individuals. In addition, the present study examined differences between persons that scored at or above one standard deviation above the mean on the Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI) and persons scoring below one standard deviation above the mean. Future researchers might consider examining more substantial differences in religious commitment between participants; for example, differences in forgiveness based on high religious commitment (at or above one standard deviation above the mean) or low religious commitment (at or below one standard deviation below the mean). A comparison such as this might better enable researchers to study significant differences in forgiveness based on religious commitment.

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APPENDIX A: STUDY 1

Initials: _____ Date: _____

Religious Affiliation:
How long have you practiced this religion?:
Sex: Age:

Thank you for being willing to participate in the study and coming in to talk to us today. Please answer the following questions to determine if you are eligible to participate in the study.

1. Can you think of a time when someone hurt or offended you in a significant way?

YES NO (please circle one)

If FORGIVENESS is defined as replacing bitter, angry feelings of vengefulness with feelings of good will toward the person who hurt you, then using the following scale…

1= NOT AT ALL 2= A LITTLE 3=MODERATELY 4= VERY MUCH 5=COMPLETELY

2. To what degree have you forgiven the person who hurt or offended you? _____

Directions: Read each of the following statements. Using the scale to the right, CIRCLE the response that best describes how true each statement is for you.

Not at all true of me	Somewhat true of me	Moderately true of me	Mostly true of me	Totally true of me
1	2	3	4	5

_____ 1. I often read books and magazines about my faith.
_____ 2. I make financial contributions to my religious organization.
_____ 3. I spend time trying to grow in understanding of my faith.
_____ 4. Religion is especially important to me because it answers many questions about the meaning of life.
_____ 5. My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life.
_____ 6. I enjoy spending time with others of my religious affiliation.
_____ 7. Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life.
_____ 8. It is important to me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and reflection.
_____ 9. I enjoy working in the activities of my religious affiliation.
_____ 10. I keep well informed about my local religious group and have some influence in its decisions.

Interview Questions

Introduction: The primary purpose of this study is to understand what role you perceive religion to play (if any) in helping you to overcome a specific hurtful event in your life. We want to hear in your own words your experiences of dealing with and overcoming some offense, difficulty, or trauma and how your religious commitments, beliefs, and/or practices helped or hindered you.

Briefly describe the role that your religious beliefs or commitment plays in your life, past and current.

Interviewer: We want you to think of a specific time that you were hurt or offended by someone and you forgave them.

Briefly describe the offense that you experienced. How long ago did it occur?

What motivated you to forgive your offender?

What role do you think that religion played (if any) in helping you to overcome the specific hurtful event in your life?

What aspect(s) most helped you to forgive the person who hurt you?

Are there any specific aspects of your faith commitment that helped you to forgive?

Are you able to identify any non-religious aspects in your life that especially helped you to forgive?

Is forgiveness a value that is typically emphasized in your religious tradition? How so?

What do you believe your religious tradition says about forgiveness?

What basis does your religion give for why forgiveness is important?

How vital were your religious beliefs in motivating you to forgive?

How was the experience of the hurt and the process of forgiving influenced your faith, if at all?

Table 7

Comprehensive List of Themes from Participant Interviews.

	Motivation to forgive *(why they forgave)*:	**Strategies used to forgive *(how they forgave)*:**
Religious Elements	To draw closer to God (4) Be like Christ/God (4) Forgive others because God forgives us (4) God wants us to be nonjudgmental (2) Desire openness to God (2) Karma (1) Move towards enlightenment (1) Prophets model forgiveness (1) Jewish tradition emphasizes present and not living in past (1) God calls us to love others (1) Accountability is God's role, not mine (1) Parables from Bible (1)	Looked to my relationship with God for strength (6) Prayer (for self, offender, forgiveness) (6) Spiritual Good/Growth arising from offense (5) Asking for God's help (4) Reading religious texts (4) Consulting a religious leader (3) Support of religious community (3) Lord's Prayer (3) Days of Atonement (2) Attended worship/religious services (2) "God worked in me" (2) Eucharist/Communion (2) 10 Commandments (2) God's love (2) Turned my forgiveness journey over to God (1) Spirituality (1) Religious study (1) Tashlich (Jewish ritual) (1) God's Presence with me (1) Spiritual retreat (1) Religious anointment (1) Monastic routine (1) Read Quran (1)

Table 7 Continued

Secular Elements	Forgive to be forgiven by others (8) Achieve peace (6) Decrease bitterness (6) For community and society as a whole (5) Decrease anger (4) As a "gift" to myself (4) To be myself/"free to be who I am" (3) Energy would be better spent elsewhere (3) Connect with others (2) Family (2) Reduce burden of unforgiveness (2) "Natural" to forgive (2) Relationships are more important than things (2) Forgiveness was emphasized as a child (2) Universality (1) Better the world (1) Anger is "Not me" (1) Want to feel goodwill towards offender (1) Balance in life (1) Hurt "isn't worth it" (1) Desire to "let go" (1) Regain control (1) Efforts needed elsewhere (1) Tired of feeling powerless (1) Health reasons (1) Reach self-actualization (1) Offender apologized (1) Reconciliation (1) Forgive others to forgive myself (1) Self- love (1) Offender aging (1) Decrease revenge (1)	Developing empathy towards offender (8) Focusing on positive qualities of offender (8) Personal Good/Growth arising from offense (7) Spent time alone (5) Humanity (belief that we all make mistakes) (4) Attend therapy (4) Acceptance that offender will not change (3) Supportive relationship (2) Addressing emotions (2) Meditation (2) Time without offender (2) Expressed forgiveness to offender (2) Educated self about forgiveness (2) Passage of time (2) Artistic Expression (1) Yoga (1) Enjoyable activities (1) Examining my role in the offense (1) Honesty with my feelings (1) Lecture on Forgiveness (1) Offering apology to persons I hurt in the past (1) Examining situation objectively (1) Mindfulness (1) 12 Step Program (1) Forgiveness role model (1) Time off work (1) Remind myself forgiveness is a choice (1) Offense could have been worse (1) Wrote letter to offender (1)

Note. Parentheses denote number of participants endorsing theme.

Table 8
Report of Inter-rater Reliability

	Rater 1	**Rater 2**
Interview 2		
Motivations to Forgive	Decrease anger	Decrease anger Move towards enlightenment
Strategies to Forgive	12 step program Attend therapy Meditation Supportive relationships	12 step program Attend therapy Meditation Supportive relationships
Interview 4		
Motivations to Forgive	Decrease anger To be myself	Decrease anger To be myself
Strategies to Forgive	Read religious texts Prayer	Read religious texts Prayer
Interview 6		
Motivations to Forgive	Be like God Forgive others because God forgives us Reduce burden of unforgiveness Relationships are more important than things	Be like God Forgive others because God forgives us Reduce burden of unforgiveness
Strategies to Forgive	Focusing on positive qualities of offender Reading religious texts Forgiveness role model Consulted with a religious leader Prayer Looking to relationship with God for strength	Focusing on positive qualities of offender Reading religious texts Forgiveness role model Consulted with a religious leader Prayer Looking to relationship with God for strength

APPENDIX B: STUDY 2

Overcoming the Hurt

Learning to Forgive Past Offenses

Facilitator Manual

This workshop on forgiveness has been generously funded in part by the Center for the Study of Violence, Iowa State University, and the Department of Psychology, Iowa State University, and sanctioned by the Institutional Review Board of Iowa State University [Office of Research Compliance, 1138 Pearson Hall, Ames, IA 50011-2207] in compliance with federal regulations, and conducted under the supervision of Nathaniel Wade, PhD [Department of Psychology, W112 Lagomarcino Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, 50011].

Session 1: Getting Started

I. INTRODUCTION (45 MINUTES)

☑ **Materials** – Participant manuals, pencils/pens, confidentiality contracts

☑ **Overview**
- Overall Workshop
  - What it will include: 2x/wk for 3 wks, discussion and info
  - Goals: understanding and moving toward forgiveness
- Today's session
  - Introductions b/c we want to get to know each other
  - Your goals for the workshop
  - Start discussing forgiveness

☑ **Ground Rules (to protect group trust and safety)**
- Be on time
- Actively participate (of course, one can do this in ways other than talking)
- If you have to be absent, please tell the leader (provide contact info)
- And most importantly, keep all material confidential (see below)

☑ **Confidentiality**
- Explain policy & rationale (to make participants more comfortable sharing)
- Sign and collect confidentiality contracts

☑ **Questions?**

☑ **Introductions**

- Introduce yourself to the group: Make it informally professional. You will start the tone, so if you are relaxed and share about yourself (including some personal info) this will encourage them to do the same.
- Ask group members to introduce themselves, one at a time, by sharing their name, class standing, major, and future plans/career.
- Now, have them say their names again and share why they chose to participate in this workshop.

☑ **Group Icebreaker**
- Introduce the icebreaker and then start by sharing your expectations, hopes, and uncertainties about the workshop. Try to share at least one uncertainty, this will encourage them to do the same.
- Have them share and discuss their expectations, hopes, and uncertainties about the workshop.

☑ **Making it Worthwhile**
- Finally, encourage them to complete the question in their workbooks on page 2, "What would make this experience worthwhile to you?"
- Have those who are willing share with the group (try to get as many people involved as possible).

II. DISCUSSION OF FORGIVENESS (35 MINUTES)

☑ **Defining Forgiveness** – Ask participants to offer definitions of what forgiveness is. Encourage a variety of definitions.

☑ Ask them to provide specific examples of forgiving (real or imaginary).

☑ **Images of Forgiveness –** From the list below, ask each person to select 3 images that have significance for them personally, and then rank those selections in the order of their meaning.

- To *forgive* is to clean & straighten a room that has been neglected too long.
- To *forgive* is to write in large letters across a debt, "Nothing owed."
- To *forgive* is to bundle all the garbage & dispose of it, leaving the house clean.
- To *forgive* is to untie the moorings of a ship & release it into the open sea.
- To *forgive* is to relax a stranglehold on a wrestling opponent.
- To *forgive* is to sandblast a wall of graffiti, leaving it looking like new.

If you're comfortable doing so, please take this opportunity to share with the group the image that is most meaningful to you. What about it makes it so meaningful?

Thank you all for sharing – (others in the group seemed very interested in what you had to say). Before we move on to the next activity, I want you all to have the opportunity to make up an original, personally meaningful image that you would like to add to the list. Have them share these with the group.

Ask for a volunteer to read the description of forgiveness aloud. Talk them through the following elements of the definition.

- *process*
- *suffer an unjust injury*
- *positive change in feeling*
- *choose mercy over retribution*
- *voluntary*
- *unconditional*
- *no apology required*

Encourage discussion on what does not constitute forgiveness. The discussion should include – but not be limited to:

- reconciling
- forgetting
- pardoning
- excusing
- denying

Discuss the following quote with the group. Encourage participants to look for personal meaning in it.

Quote: Forgiveness is freeing up and putting to better use the energy once consumed by holding grudges, harboring resentments, and nursing unhealed wounds. It is rediscovering the strengths we always had and relocating our limitless capacity to understand and accept other people and ourselves. ~ Sidney and Suzanne Simon

Encourage the group to process these aspect of forgiveness. As an example, lead them in a discussion on the differences between forgiveness and reconciling. Use the table and chart provided below to guide them through the discussion.

Forgiving an offender

§ Intrapersonal (internal)
§ Need not entail restoration of relationship
§ Gift given to one by one person to another

Reconciling w/ offender

§ Interpersonal (between 2 or more people)
§ Results in restoration or relationship
§ Earned through trustworthy behavior

FORGIVING OFFENDER		RECONCILING WITH OFFENDER	
		YES	NO
	YES	Relationship is restored	Offender is forgiven, but relationship is not restored
	NO	Relationship is restored, but offender is still unforgiven	Offender is still unforgiven & relationship is not restored

Continue the conversation using the following questions as a guide:

- Can you come up with examples for each of the 4 categories above?
- When would someone forgive but not reconcile?... reconcile but not forgive… both forgive and reconcile… neither forgive nor reconcile?
- See if they can apply this in their own lives. Have they experienced any of these situations? Can they share them with the group?
- Discuss: Given this definition of forgiveness that we have been developing today, how difficult do you think it will be for you to forgive the person who hurt you?

III. WRAP UP (10 MINUTES)

To conclude the first session, ask participants to reflect on today's session. Cover the following topics in a wrap-up discussion:

1. What are your thoughts and ideas about the content of today's session?
    a. Forgiving
    b. Distinction between forgiving and reconciliation
2. How do you feel about the group now that you've completed the first session?
    a. Are your thoughts about the group the same or different from when you first arrived today?
    b. How comfortable do you feel with the group? How can that be improved?
3. Remind them about the next session, date and time.
4. Have them complete the post session feedback forms.

Session 2: Recalling the Event

I. INTRODUCTION (10 MINUTES)

1. Begin the session by welcoming the members back.
2. Then, recap the last session.
    a. Introductions
    b. What is forgiveness?
    c. How is forgiving different than reconciling?
3. Ask them for feedback/comments about the first group.
4. Finally, provide an overview of today's session.
5. Boundary breaking – Sharing personal events with the group.

    What is something significant that occurred for you in the last week that you haven't told anyone about yet?

Give everyone an opportunity to answer 1st question before moving on to the 2nd.

What is the most significant thing that has happened to you in the past year?

II. REMEMBERING THE HURTFUL EVENT (10 MINUTES)

Everyone undergoes negative life events at some time or other. How well they cope depends a great deal on how they manage what they're feeling at the time. Failure to understand and digest upsetting experiences is linked with the development of lasting psychological and physiological hurt. Fortunately, according to one psychologist, 95% of personal emotional experiences are shared the same day they occur (Rime, 1995). The irony, of course, is that the most painful experiences are the ones we most need to disclose and seek support for, yet they also often happen to find their way into that 5% we don't disclose. Recalling and talking about these events can help people to gain new perspectives that make hurtful experiences easier to live with.

☑ **Recollection exercise** –**Guided Recollection Exercise** –Ask them to follow your cues as you read the follow:

I would like for us to take some time to remember the offense, what happened, how you reacted, and what the result was. To do this, I invite you to imagine a scene with me. First, I would like for you all to take a few deep breaths, and if you are comfortable, close your eyes. (PAUSE) Allow the sights and sounds of the room, your thoughts, and any other distractions to leave your mind. Take another deep breath. (PAUSE) Imagine now that you are leaving this room from the door you entered. You get up, walk to the door and leave. (PAUSE) Follow the hallway to the exit and leave the building. As you step outside, you notice that the sun is shining brightly and a cool, clear sky greets you. The temperature is comfortable and a quiet breeze is blowing. Now imagine that you look down and the familiar sidewalk outside this building is actually a smooth dirt path bordered by lush green grass. The path stretches off out of sight into a forest of tall trees. Follow the path toward the trees. (PAUSE) As you do, the path begins weaving among the large trees. You feel light and relaxed, your steps are effortless. The path leads you deep into the woods, away from town, away from the distractions of schoolwork, and away from your current responsibilities. (PAUSE)
Up ahead, you notice a clearing. In the center of the clearing is a large television screen, with large old fashioned knobs for the power and the volume. Walk up to the screen and imagine turning the power

on. When you do, you can see two people interacting. You realize that it is you and the person who hurt you. It appears that you are having a conversation with the offender just after the offense occurred. You can now listen in on this conversation. To do so, turn up the volume on the television. If you feel uncomfortable at any point you can always turn down the volume or turn off the television. (PAUSE) Listen now to the conversation. What are you saying to the offender? What are you experiencing? (PAUSE) How are you experiencing your emotions? Do you feel tense? Is there anything that you haven't said that you would now like to? Go ahead and say that to the person. (PAUSE) What is the individual saying back to you? As you watch the person who hurt you from this new vantage point, what do you think he or she is experiencing? (PAUSE) After a few minutes of discussion, the conversation ends. How does it end? Do you feel the same hurt, or have you been able to resolve the conflict? As you continue watching, you see yourself eventually leave the person who hurt you. You see on the screen that the offender is now alone. Not knowing that you are listening, she or he begins thinking aloud. What is the offender thinking? What does she or he express now that you are not there? (PAUSE)

It is now time to return. First, turn the television off. Now, slowly turn and find the path that took you into the clearing. (PAUSE) Follow the path back out of the woods until you are standing before this building. Enter the building and walk to the door to this room. Now enter the room and find the seat you are now sitting in. (PAUSE) When you are ready slowly open your eyes.

III. SHARING THE HURTFUL EVENT (45 MINUTES)

☑ Sharing & Understanding the Hurt

Discuss the guided imagery experience: Help the group to explore how they handled the situation and how they wish they would have handled it. Try to solicit perspectives and support of other group members. Try to also acknowledge that painful events *did* occur that are understandably hard to forgive. *Empathize, empathize, empathize*.

- Let's discuss this exercise. I'd like to hear from as many of you as possible. If it's too uncomfortable, you may certainly pass, but I encourage you all to share at least a part of your story with the group if you are comfortable doing so. What happened? How did you get hurt? What was your experience of this exercise? (As follow-up if they don't understand: "To what degree were you really able to imagine this scenario? Could you follow a conversation between yourself and the person who hurt you," etc?)

- Summarize common themes and close discussion. Interpersonal hurts can create a lot of different emotions and reactions. It seems many of these hurts have had some significant impact in your lives.

- Ask participants to use the 10-point scale provided to denote how they felt when they thought about the incident. Discuss.

- Ask participants to use the 10-point scale provided to denote how they felt *after* having shared their story with others. Discuss. Encourage individuals who experienced a change in their rating during the previous exercise to put forward what they think led to the change.

IV. "OWNING" YOUR EXPERIENCE (20 MINUTES)

This exercise is intended to help participants recognize, allow and accept their experiences, and thereby take control of them. Explain each of the steps below and provide practice and/or discussion as you go through them.

- **Recognize** your experience, your thoughts & bodily sensations
  - Often we experience things that we are not even aware of. It might be an emotion, a sensation in the body, or thoughts that happen so automatically we aren't even aware of them. (Ask for some examples, or provide them if they can't think of any.) The first part of understanding your experience is to take time to be aware of yourself and recognize your own experience. Let's practice that now. (Walk them through a mindfulness exercise, focusing on the sensations they are currently having. Discuss their experience of this.)

- **Allow** yourself to experience them
  - The second part of owning your experience is to allow yourself to really experience whatever is going on for you. Sometimes we learn to avoid our experience, to ignore the sensations we have, or to suppress our awareness of ourselves. (Provide examples.) One way of thinking about this is with the analogy of a house that contains all of our experiences. Imagine a house right now that can contain your memories, experiences, and reactions from throughout your life. If you disallow an experience (disregard, ignore, or suppress it), it is like stuffing a bag full of garbage and tossing it behind a closed door. Now, any house can withstand a little hidden garbage, but not much before it starts to rot and stink up the whole house. To avoid storing away trash, you need to allow yourself to experience your reactions. Discussion: When is it easiest for you to fully experience your reactions? When is it hardest?

- **Accept** your experience ("they are what they are")
  - Finally, after recognizing and allowing your experiences, you can accept them. Understanding that experiences are what they are, and that they do not necessarily have to control you, you can accept them as a part of you without being ruled by them. Discussion: What of this makes sense to you? Does anyone have an example of this from their own life? What is one part of the specific events we talked about earlier that you have not recognized, allowed, or accepted?

V. WRAP-UP (5 MINUTES)

☑ **Wrap up** – The main goal in the wrap-up will be to give them some decompression time. To do this, facilitate a process-oriented discussion of what it was like for them to come back today, and share their hurts with others.

☑ Remind them about the next session: date and time.

☑ Ask them to complete the post-session feedback form.

Session 3: Returning to the Event

I. INTRODUCTION (10 MINUTES)

1. Begin the session by welcoming the members back.
2. Recap the last session.
   a. Remembering the hurtful event
   b. Sharing the hurtful event – difference in how they felt (measured by 10-pt continuum) after they thought about the event vs. after they shared the event with others.
   c. Owning your experience – *recognize* your experiences, *allow* yourself to experience them, *accept* them for what they are.
3. Ask them for feedback/comments about the last group.
4. Finally, provide an overview of today's session.
   a. Discuss more about anger, its expression, and how to use it for your benefit.
5. Boundary breaking – One at a time, ask group members:

   What is something important about you that few people know?

II. OPENING DISCUSSION (10 MINUTES)

☑ Summary and Check up: Discuss with the group the progress they feel they have made so far. Use the following questions to stimulate conversation about what they have learned. (If they have trouble responding, have them write the answers to the questions in their manuals first and then discuss what they wrote.)

What have you learned so far in this group that might be helpful for you?
Compared with when you first started this group, how are you doing now?
What has been the most helpful thing about this workshop for you so far?

III. RETURNING TO THE HURTFUL EVENT (35 MINUTES)

☑ Begin this exercise by creating a list of the pros and cons of recalling hurtful events. As the group offers suggestions, create a list. Once the list has been completed to the group's satisfaction, discuss.

☑ Ask everyone to choose the one pro and the one con that are most significant for them as a unique individual. Once they have done so, ask them to share these with the group. Stress to them how valuable this will be to the group, since there may be both others who feel as they do and/or others who once felt that way and now have a new perspective that they can share.

☑ Ask and discuss: What would make it easier for you to share the hurtful experience ***with this group***? Really challenge everyone to come up with something. Even if they struggle to find an answer, encourage them to share something with the group that might make it easier for them to share.

☑ Now, encourage participants – to the extent that they are comfortable – to once again share their recollection of the hurtful event with those in the group.

- This exercise will serve to remind their fellow group members of the episode, allow others to share who have not had a chance to, and help members to share more deeply about the episode. As they tell their stories again, ask them to highlight things that they did not share before or things that they have learned/realized since the last session.

IV. THE ACT OF SHARING ONE'S STORY (25 MINUTES)

☑ **Group discussion**:

- Ask participants to use the 10-point scale provided to denote how they feel after having shared their story with others? Encourage individuals who experienced a change in their rating during the previous exercise to put forward what they think led to the change?

- Ask participants to indicate on the continuum provided in their manuals how comfortable they are sharing with the group.

- Who would you share the hurtful experience with (friend, family member, clergy) were you to do so? What would make it easier for you to share *with that person*? Help them explore this question and share their insights with the group.

- What would make it easier for you to share the hurtful experience *with the offender*? Take lots of time on any discussion that ensues. Again, really challenge them to explore possibilities – it may never be easy, but surely something would make it a little easier. Reinforce any empathy, encouragement, or validation that other group members offer.

V. WRAP-UP (10 MINUTES)

☑ **Wrap up** – The main goal in the wrap-up will be to give them some decompression time. To do this, facilitate a process-oriented discussion of what it was like for them to come back today, and share their hurts with others.

☑ To conclude on a positive note, ask everyone in the group to share one thing that they liked most about this group today.

☑ Remind them about the next session: date and time.

☑ Ask them to complete the post-session feedback form.

Session 4: Building Empathy

I. Introduction (10 minutes)

1. Begin the session by welcoming the members back.
2. Recap the last session.
   a. How it feels to share
   b. Dynamics of sharing
3. Ask them for feedback/comments about the last group.
4. Provide an overview of today's session.
   a. Identifying with and understanding of the unique situations, feelings, and motives of others.
5. Boundary breaking – One at a time, ask group members:

   If you could magically have one talent, what would it be?

II. Dealing with personal offenses (15 minutes)

☑ **Defining empathy** – Before proceeding to the following discussions and activities, it is important that everyone gain an understanding of what empathy is. Empathy can mean different things to different people, and that doesn't make one person right and one person wrong. What we are concerned with is how participants in the group *personally experience* empathy.

The group's first task is to define empathy. Ask them to take a moment to write down in the space provided in their manuals what empathy means to them.

Once they have done this, ask them to share their definitions with the group. Group members should be encouraged to write down the key words from definitions given by others in the group in the next space provided.

Empathy is …

- … an emotional phenomenon
- … a cognitive phenomenon
- … a vicarious emotion, or experiencing what another person is feeling
- … seeing things from another person's point of view
- … understanding the offender and the possible motives the offender had for committing the offense

Empathy is not …

- … sympathy
- … justifying hurtful acts
- … freeing others from responsibility

III. WHY DO PEOPLE COMMIT OFFENSES? (15 MINUTES)

☑ Show clip from *Shawshank Redemption* (4 min.). In the clip, Brooks, the elderly librarian who has spent 50 years in prison, learns that he has been paroled. In an act of desperation, he seizes a fellow inmate and threatens to slit his throat. While the other inmates eventually convince Brooks to let the man go, this man expresses no empathy for Brooks. Morgan Freeman's character explains why it's understandable that Brooks did this. After the clip is over, ask for a volunteer to explain how the clip is related to empathy. Try to get multiple perspectives. Also, ask the group:

- Was there a cost associated with being empathic toward Brooks?
- What are some possible benefits (either to others or to oneself) of having empathy in situations like this?

IV. DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES (20 MINUTES)

☑ The purpose of the following exercise is to understand that regardless of right or wrong, different people can and often do experience/remember the same event quite differently. I am going to read a brief story. I want some of you to put yourself in Harold's shoes and some of you to put yourself in Arthur's shoes. (Split the group in half.) Listen carefully to the details of the following story.

STORY:

Harold and Arthur were suitemates here at ISU. They knew each other fairly well but did not consider themselves to be "best friends." One fall semester, Arthur was enrolled in an upper-level engineering class that Harold had completed the previous spring.

Harold had prepared very thoroughly for this class and, as a result, had done very well (A+, quite an accomplishment). One day, he made a vague sort of offer to assist Arthur on any course work in that particular class. As it turned out, there were to be no exams, rather a final paper that counted as 75% of the grade. This paper was due the Wednesday of finals week.

The semester passed without incident, as both suite mates attended classes, prepared assignments, and tried to squeeze in some fun as well. One week before the paper was due, Arthur reminded Harold of his earlier offer, stating, "I need you to help me write this paper." Harold responded, "No, I said that I would help you with exams in the class." Arthur replied, "But there are no exams this semester, just this big paper!" Harold sighed, "Oh. Well, I guess I can help you." (Harold didn't mind helping Arthur with an exam, just not a paper.) The two suite mates decided to get together to work on the paper the Tuesday afternoon before it was due.

On the designated day, 1 week later, Harold did not show up for his appointment. He stumbled in 2 hours later, drunk and a bit surly. It seems that he forgot about having promised to assist Arthur with the paper and made plans to go out drinking with his buddies. (It was "$2 pitcher night" for margaritas.) As you might expect, Harold was of little help to Arthur. To add to the pressure, Arthur's computer was on the blink, making it difficult to get any work done. While in his inebriated state, Harold again promised to help Arthur with the paper, although not until Thursday. Arthur was forced to ask his professor for an extension (due supposedly to his

computer problems). The professor was not happy with the request, but he agreed to the extension.

On Thursday afternoon, Arthur went looking for Harold and found him in his suite. Harold now refused to help Arthur, as he had too much to do and time was running out. He did apologize for the situation but was firm in his refusal to help. Later on that night, Arthur hit a snag in his paper and stopped by Harold's room to ask a quick question. Harold was on the phone and motioned for Arthur to come back later. Arthur stopped back at 11:45 pm and again at 12:15 am, but Harold was still on the phone. (Arthur found out later that he was talking long distance to his girlfriend. It seems that they were discussing a change in their Christmas vacation plans because their relationship had not been going well.) After a time, Arthur gave up and returned to his room to complete the paper on his own.

This particular class was central to Arthur's major. Before the paper, he had a B in the class. After turning in the paper, his grade dropped to a C, as he received only a C on the paper. The TA who graded the paper made comments that included "Good ideas, but where is the theory?" and "Your reasoning is faulty. What are you trying to say?" As a result of this experience, Arthur ended up majoring in English at another university.

EXPERIMENT:

What went wrong? Who was to blame for this? Allow discussion and try to highlight differences among the group members with different perspectives.

This story was used in an experiment to explore the effects of perspective (Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997). Participants in this study were asked to take one of the two perspectives you all took, or to be "observers."

1. **"Which group do you think remembered the facts of the narrative most accurately?" [Discuss]**

2. **"Which group do you think remembered the facts of the narrative least accurately?" [Discuss]**

RESULTS:

Victims made an average of 25 distortions per story, perpetrators also made an average of 25 distortions per story, whereas control participants made an average of 17 distortions. Thus, perpetrators and victims made nearly the identical number of mistakes. However, both perpetrators and victims made significantly *more* errors than did the control participants.

3. **"Why did perpetrators and victims make an equal number of mistakes, but significantly more mistakes than controls?"**

Perpetrators were the most accurate in their inclusion of the mitigating and positive details, while victims were the least accurate in their inclusion of these details. Similarly, victims were the most accurate in their inclusion of details that exacerbated the offense or described the severity of the offense, while perpetrators were the least accurate in their inclusion of these details. Victim stories tended to highlight details that reflected the negative outcome and the perpetrators' role in that outcome, while ignoring details that might have justified or mitigated the

perpetrators' actions. On the other hand, perpetrators prominently featured this information and were also less likely to discuss the negative outcome that the victims experienced.

These results suggest that taking a singular perspective caused people to both include and exclude pertinent details. Thus, it is apparent that people in differing circumstances may remember the same event in very different ways.

V. DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON YOUR OFFENSE (20 MINUTES)

Discuss: How does this information relate to your situation?

Exercise: Let's apply this information to the situations where people have hurt us. Would you be willing to take your offenders' perspectives for a few minutes?

Discuss. Encourage the group to think about how their offenders might have experienced the hurt or offense. Have them complete the exercise on pg. 10. They are to write a letter from the offender to themselves. But this is not just an apology letter where the offender grovels. Instead, the letter should express the experience of the events from the offender's perspective. Why did they do what they did? What were they trying to accomplish, even if very hurtfully or poorly? How did they feel it was unavoidable to hurt the group member? Participants should explore as much of this as possible in the letters.

Discuss the letters.

VI. WRAP-UP (10 MINUTES)

- ☑ **Wrap up** – The main goal in the wrap-up will be to give them some decompression time. To do this, facilitate a process-oriented discussion of what it was like for them to come back today and share with the group.
- ☑ To conclude on a positive note, ask everyone in the group to share one thing that they liked most about this group today.
- ☑ Remind them about the next session: date and time.
- ☑ Ask them to complete the post-session feedback form.

Session 5: Empathy for the Person Who Hurt *You*

I. Introduction (10 Minutes)

1. Begin the session by welcoming the members back.
2. Recap the last session.
   a. Understanding empathy
   b. Understanding different perspectives: Harold and Arthur
   c. Gaining a different perspective on your offense
3. Ask them for feedback/comments about the last group.
4. Provide an overview of today's session.
   a. Understanding the person who hurt you
   b. The altruistic gift of forgiveness
5. Boundary breaking – One at a time, ask group members:

   What is the greatest value that guides your life?

II. Returning to the Offense (15 Minutes)

This exercise will gauge where members of the group are in their willingness to forgive. Regardless of where they stand, stress that the most important thing is that they be honest about how they really feel.

Think back to last week's exercise in which you practiced building empathy for others.

"Your task is to try to imagine in the same way you did last session:

(a) What circumstances or perspectives might have motivated *your* perpetrator to inadvertently/deliberately hurt or offend you?

(b) How might your perpetrator remember the event that was hurtful to you in such a way that the hurt is not apparent to him/her?

Discuss the group member's reactions.

III. Forgiveness as an Altruistic Gift (40 Minutes)

☑ **Recalling our own transgressions exercise [Part I]**

Facilitate a silent recollection exercise in which they are to recall a time when they did something that hurt somebody, and were ultimately forgiven by that person. Have the group members recall the event with as much detail as they can. Once they bring back the memory of the events, have them ponder the following questions.

- What did you feel when you knew you had hurt someone else? Try to think of all your reactions.
- Did you ever want the person you hurt to forgive you? What did that feel like?

- How did you feel when the person forgave you? [e.g., relief, release, freedom, redemption]?

This activity serves to:

- Remind them that they too have hurt others and felt guilt that goes with that.
- Allow them to feel positive emotions, particularly gratitude, that accompany being forgiven.
- Hopefully associate the positive emotions they are presently feeling with their offender, who they will soon be thinking of.

☑ Recalling our own transgressions exercise [Part II]

Now, the group members will be asked to share with each other what they were just remembering. While one group member is sharing the other members should try to empathize with both the group member and the person they hurt.

I'd like for you all now to share with each other those times that you hurt someone else. As you tell your story, try to be aware of the natural human tendency to recall the event in a way that makes you seem less guilty (like the experiment from last week), and resist the temptation to do so – the group will be appreciative of your willingness to be honest and vulnerable.

When someone else is retelling their personal story, your job is to listen closely. Try to imagine what both parties were experiencing. Try to imagine what the offended person might have believed about the group member's motives. When the speaker is done with the recollection, share with the group possibilities of what the victim of the transgression might have assumed and felt.

Once each listener has empathized with the person the group member hurt, he or she should then try to empathize with the offending person (i.e., the group member). If you feel you understand what the speaker was going through, try to voice your understanding …

For instance:

- What might the speaker have been feeling at the time he or she committed the offense?
- What might his or her intentions or motivations have been at the time?
- Are there any vicarious emotions that you as listeners might have been feeling for the speaker while the story was being told?

Discussion: Have the group members now share what it felt like to be forgiven. How did they know the person they hurt forgave them? What was their reaction to being forgiven? Here you are trying to facilitate their awareness of being grateful and relieved that they had been forgiven. This may help them to transfer their feelings to the person who hurt them, maybe their offenders also want to be forgiven and would be grateful for it.

IV. GIFT GIVING (15 MINUTES)

Return the group's attention to the previous discussion and of what was learned today. Ask the group:

> Having been in the shoes of someone who needed to be forgiven, you can now see how much power you have to help someone else experience that same need. Forgiveness is not mandatory – forgiveness is a gift.

Discuss with the group what it means to give a gift of forgiveness.

> Would you like to give your offender a gift of forgiveness?

Urge them to be honest – they are not being judged or rated. Some group members may still need more time. Explain to those who are ready to forgive that the fear of hurt may lead them to question giving this gift, and they should try to be mindful of this.

It may be helpful to ask them to do a cost-benefit analysis. Ask them first to list the costs of forgiving the person who hurt them. Then, ask them to list the benefits of forgiving this person.

Discuss:

What does it feel like to have the opportunity to give a gift to the offending person?

V. WRAP-UP (10 MINUTES)

- ☑ **Wrap up** – The main goal in the wrap-up will be to give them some decompression time. To do this, facilitate a process-oriented discussion of what it was like for them to come back today, and share their hurts with others.
- ☑ To conclude on a positive note, ask everyone in the group to share one thing that they liked most about this group today.
- ☑ Remind them about the next session, date and time.
    - **Remind them that they will only have one more session together.**
- ☑ Ask them to complete the post-session feedback form.

Session 6: Committing to Forgiveness

I. INTRODUCTION (10 MINUTES)

1. Begin the session by welcoming the members back.
2. Lead a brief discussion:
    a. How are you responding to this being the last session?
    b. What do you each hope to get out of this last session?
    c. Share how you (the facilitator) are feeling about it ending. Give your honest appraisal (within limits ☺), including good and bad if appropriate.
3. Recap the last session
    a. Understanding the person who hurt you
    b. The altruistic gift of forgiveness
4. Provide an overview of today's session
    a. Making a commitment to yourself
    b. Forgiveness is possible
5. Boundary breaking – Begin today's session with a brief icebreaker to help the participants return to being a group. In a large group setting, ask group members to answer the following questions one at a time:

    What is something that you have done that you are the most proud of?

6. Follow-up - Ask the group if they have anything they would like to discuss from last session. This gives them an opportunity to discuss any thinking they did about forgiving their offenders, or perhaps even contact with the offenders.

II. MAKING A COMMITMENT TO FORGIVE (35 MINUTES)

One way of getting past hesitancy to forgive an offense you are ready to forgive is by telling others that you have committed to do so. ***If*** you were to do this, whom could you tell? Write the names of 3 people you would tell with the intention of following through with your commitment to forgive.

Discuss other strategies for committing to forgiveness. Samples provided in their workbooks include:

- Write out a list of all the hurts and then burn, bury, or shred the paper.
- Complete a certificate of forgiveness, complete w/ names, dates, offense details, etc.

Next, challenge the group members to think about and write down a different forgiveness strategy that would work well for ***him or her***. Make sure each takes into account his or her own personality quirks and ways of doing things. Be sure that they understand what you mean by this, and discuss if necessary.

☑ **Letter of Forgiveness** – Another way of committing to forgive an offense is by writing a letter to the person who hurt you and telling this person that you have forgiven him or her. Be clear that they **do NOT need to *send* the letter** – it is only a means for them to *express* their forgiveness. If at a later time they wish to send their offender this letter, they can do so then.

III. EVALUATING THE LETTER OF FORGIVENESS (25 MINUTES)

☑ **Group Discussion** – Ask the group how it felt to write a forgiveness letter to the person who hurt them. Encourage each person to share his or her feelings.

Another question to spark discussion and personal insight is what the most difficult part for them to write was. Again, encourage each person to share his or her response, even (or especially) if they were not able to complete the letter. Ask them what insight they have as to what this says about their individual needs and what thoughts and emotions are especially powerful for them.

Finally, ask what the easiest part for them to write was. This can be just as telling as the former question. Ask them what insight they have as to what this says about their individual strengths.

IV. FORGIVE FOR NOW, FORGIVE FOREVER [WRAP UP – 20 MIN]

☑ **Closing Discussion** – To complete today's session, facilitate a discussion using the following "take-home points" as a foundation. Push the group to really take this exercise over, so that you have to do as little moderating as possible. Really encourage each participant to express everything they have inside them, as this is the final group discussion they will have; let them know that this is their final chance to really share their support and understanding with the group. Try to get them to really *own* their responses to these topics:

1. What it really means to forgive
2. Definition of forgiveness
3. Recalling the hurtful experience and sharing it with others
4. Building empathy for others, even one's offender
5. How it feels to be forgiven
6. Giving an altruistic gift to your offender
7. Making a commitment to forgiveness

☑ **Saying farewell**

- Debriefing
- Thank participants for their contributions to the group.

MEASURES UTILIZED

Batson's Empathy Adjectives

As you think about the offense, please answer the following questions about your attitude toward the person who hurt you. We do not want your ratings of past attitudes, but your rating of attitudes right now as you think about this event. After each item, please CIRCLE the word that best describes your current feeling. Please do not skip any item.

Not = Not at all **Lit** = Little **Som** = Somewhat **Mod** = Moderately **Qui** = Quite a lot **Ext** = Extremely

For example, if you were rating the word "proud," and you felt somewhat proud of the robber, you would circle the word "Som" following the word "proud." Complete the next items in the same way.

		Current Degree of Feeling					
1.	sympathetic:	Not	Lit	Som	Mod	Qui	Ext
2.	empathic:	Not	Lit	Som	Mod	Qui	Ext
3.	concerned:	Not	Lit	Som	Mod	Qui	Ext
4.	moved:	Not	Lit	Som	Mod	Qui	Ext
5.	compassionate:	Not	Lit	Som	Mod	Qui	Ext
6.	softhearted:	Not	Lit	Som	Mod	Qui	Ext
7.	warm:	Not	Lit	Som	Mod	Qui	Ext
8.	tender:	Not	Lit	Som	Mod	Qui	Ext

Trait Forgivingness Inventory

Directions: Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement below by using the following scale.

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Mildly Disagree

3 = Agree and Disagree Equally

4 = Mildly Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5	People close to me probably think I hold a grudge too long.
1 2 3 4 5	I can forgive a friend for almost anything.
1 2 3 4 5	If someone treats me badly, I treat him or her the same.
1 2 3 4 5	I try to forgive others even when they don't feel guilty for what they did.
1 2 3 4 5	I can usually forgive and forget an insult.
1 2 3 4 5	I feel bitter about many of my relationships.
1 2 3 4 5	Even after I forgive someone, things often come back to me that I resent.
1 2 3 4 5	There are some things for which I could never forgive even a loved one.
1 2 3 4 5	I have always forgiven those who have hurt me.
1 2 3 4 5	I am a forgiving person

TRIM Forgiveness Inventory

For these questions, please indicate your current thoughts and feelings about the person who hurt you. Use the following scale to indicate your agreement or disagreement with each of the statements.

a = Strongly Disagree c = Neutral d = Agree
b = Disagree e = Strongly Agree

____ I'll make him/her pay.
____ I wish that something bad would happen to him/her.
____ I want him/her to get what he/she deserves.
____ I'm going to get even.
____ I want to see him/her hurt and miserable.
____ I keep as much distance between us as possible.
____ I live as if he/she doesn't exist, isn't around.
____ I don't trust him/her.
____ I find it difficult to act warmly toward him/her.
____ I avoid him/her.
____ I cut off the relationship with him/her.
____ I withdrew from him/her

Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10)

Directions: Read each of the following statements. Using the scale to the right, CIRCLE the response that best describes how true each statement is for you.

Not at all true of me	Somewhat true of me	Moderately true of me	Mostly true of me	Totally true of me
1	2	3	4	5

1. I often read books and magazines about my faith.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I make financial contributions to my religious organization.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I spend time trying to grow in understanding of my faith.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Religion is especially important to me because it answers many questions about the meaning of life.	1	2	3	4	5
5. My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I enjoy spending time with others of my religious affiliation.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life.	1	2	3	4	5
8. It is important to me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and reflection.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I enjoy working in the activities of my religious affiliation.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I keep well informed about my local religious group and have some influence in its decisions.	1	2	3	4	5